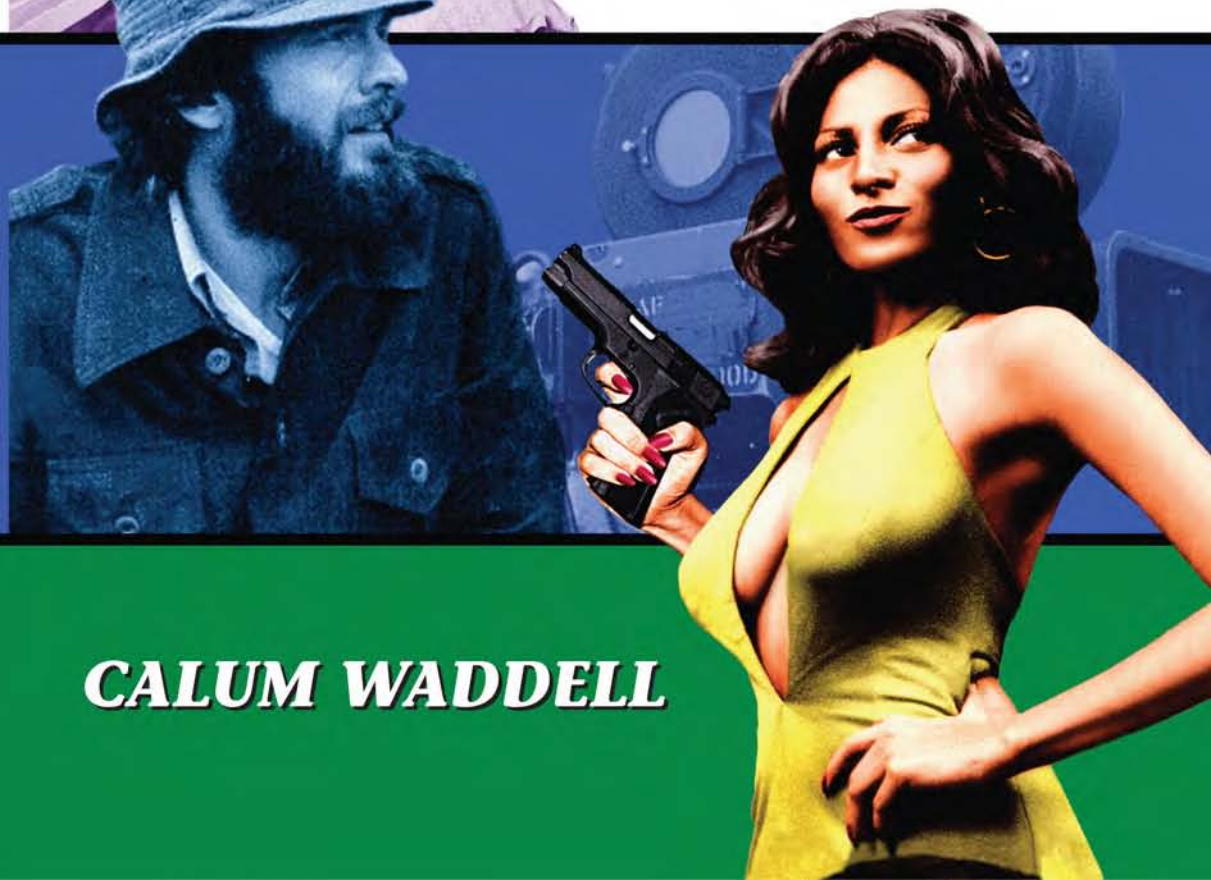
VISIT…

JACK HILL

The Exploitation and *Blaxploitation* Master, Film by Film



CALUM WADDELL

Jack Hill

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The Exploitation and Blaxploitation Master, Film by Film

Calum Waddell

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On the cover (top to bottom): The cast of *Spider Baby* (1968); director Jack Hill on set; Pam Grier in *Foxy Brown* (1974) (AIP/Photofest)

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In memory of Chevy,
my pet cat who died
during the production of this book

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Introduction

If you weren't there, then it is difficult to imagine what it was like. A world before VHS, DVD and multiplex cinemas seems unthinkable to many of us—myself included. A child of the eighties, I grew up with numerous video shops in my small, but modern, Scottish town and discovered many B-movie gems as a young boy—ripe with imagination and willing to sit down in front of practically any kind of film. The accessibility of a movie was never an issue for me—I could just as easily rent *The Evil Dead* as *Song of the South* or *The Godfather* from my local video store and I never had to wait for the theatrical re-release of a classic to see it again. Of course, this was not always the case—and in so many ways, video killed the art of the B-movie.

You see, as I grew into my teens I learned about the drive-in cinemas that were once hugely popular in North America and I also found out about 42nd Street in New York—which sounded like an exploitation film connoisseur's heaven. It was a result of such discoveries that I first came into contact with the work of Jack Hill, one of the most proficient and talented low-budget filmmakers of the sixties and seventies. After seeing *Coffy* for the first time, I knew I had stumbled upon somebody special. When one looks at Hill's movies today it is easy to be transported back to a time before six major studios effectively controlled what was shown at your nearest cinema. A time when quirky, strange and unpredictable low-budget movies were projected for audiences who, without Internet access or DVD special features, knew little about what they were about to see other than what they learned from the film's trailer or marketing campaign.

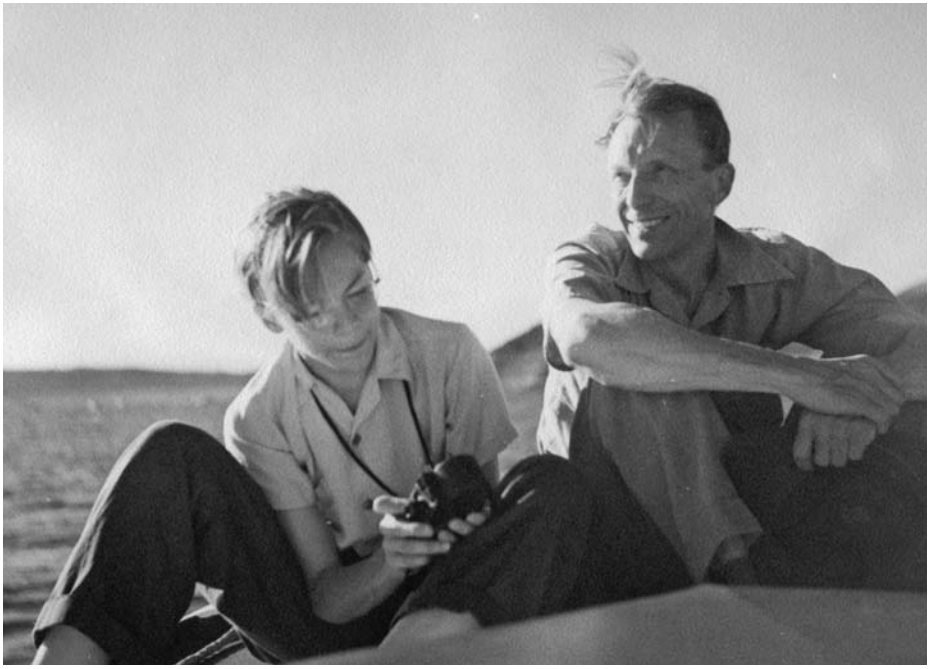
As a result, the advertising that accompanied many of the great B pictures from the sixties and seventies has become as legendary as the movies themselves—from the "To Avoid Fainting, Just Keep Repeating 'It's Only a Movie'" blurb that accompanied Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left* to Hill's own "So Easy to Love. So Hard to Kill" that was used for *Switchblade Sisters*. Considering that Hill spent a huge chunk of his career working for the legendary Roger Corman, it should come as no surprise that he was responsible for most of the tag lines that complemented his own directorial efforts—and indeed the work

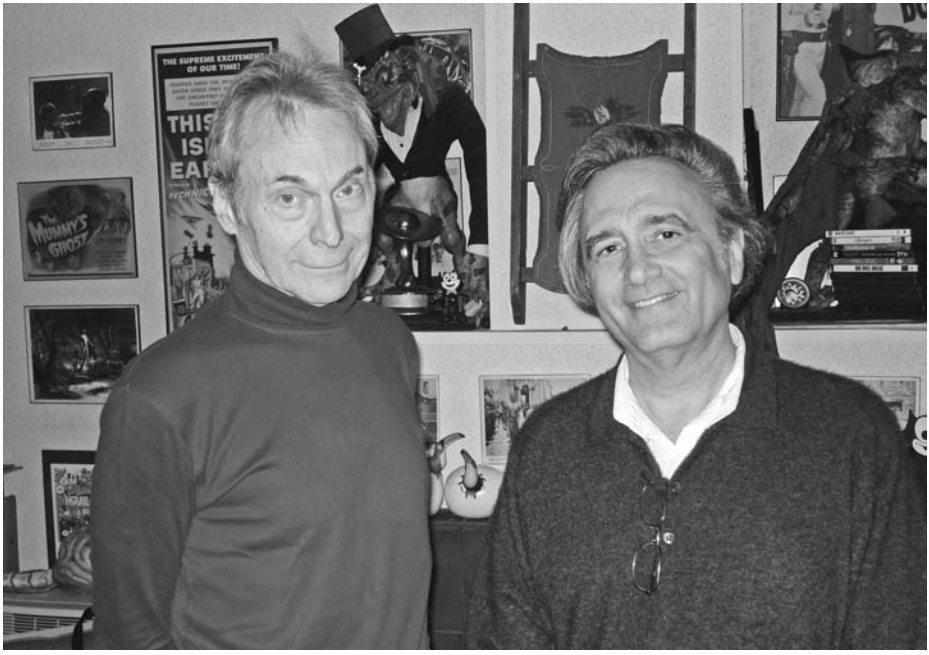
of others. His creation of "Mad Dogs from Hell, Hunting Down Their Prey with a Quarter Ton of Hot Steel Throbbing Between Their Legs" for Corman's production of *Naked Angels* (1969) is, quite frankly, brilliant.

It seems strange that it took Hill so long to become recognized in his field but the rediscovery of his work really stems from Quentin Tarantino, who gave the filmmaker a "special thanks" on *Jackie Brown* (1997), used the Pam Grier–sung theme song from *The Big Doll House* in the movie and personally re-released *Switchblade Sisters* to North American cinemas. If one is to be brutally honest, it is difficult to see the lineage and influence of Hill's grungy, low-budget material on Tarantino's more studied, and carefully plotted, shock-cinema, but the one thing the two have in common is totally believable female characters. This can be seen in Hill's classics *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*, still the two pictures that he remains best known for; Pam Grier became not only an African American leading lady but a star in a genre (the contemporary action picture) that is still feted for its testosterone-fueled violence. Likewise, Tarantino could take the comparatively waif-like Uma Thurman and transform her into an ass-kicking martial arts heroine in *Kill Bill* (2003)—making the seemingly unbelievable believable in the process. Make no mistake, this was also one of Hill's finest talents in his career as a journeyman director: taking seemingly thankless tasks (a car racing movie, Philippine women-in-prison flicks and girl-gang pictures) and crafting stories that are easy to get involved in, delirious and yet realistic, and often possessing a strong moral core.

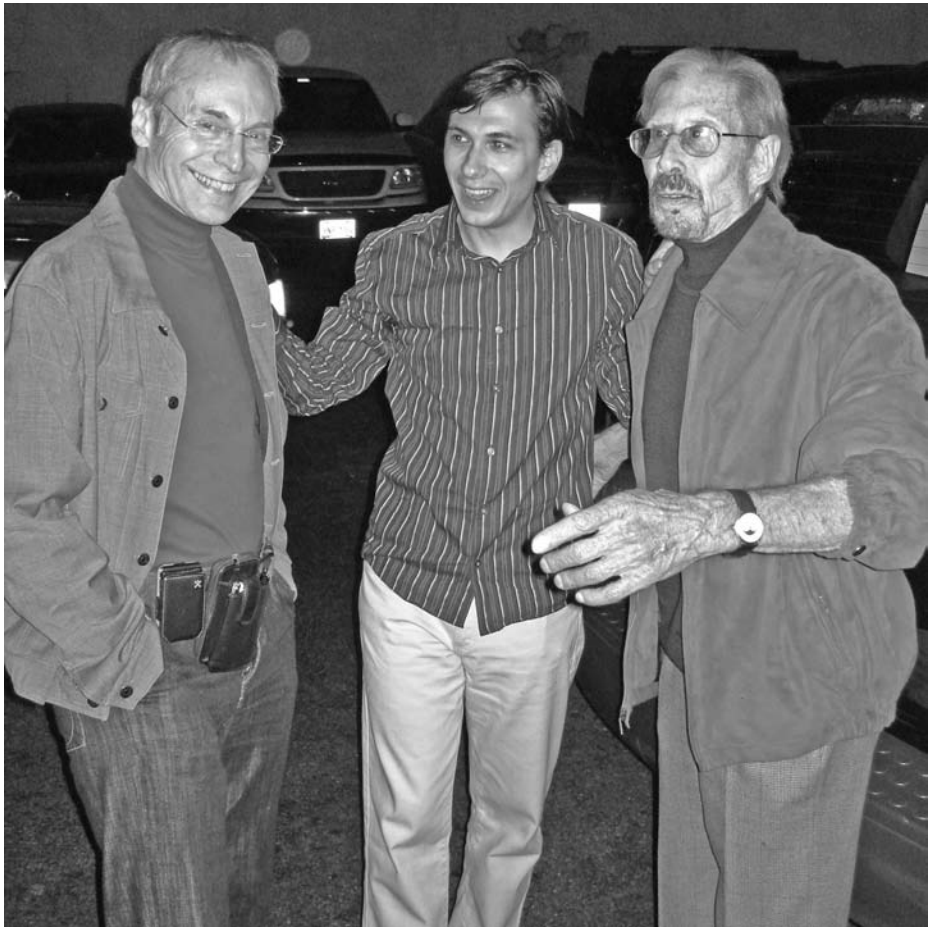
Hill has a reputation among B-movie fans as an elite cult director—even dubbed "the Howard Hawks of exploitation filmmaking" by Tarantino in his introduction to the *Switchblade Sisters* DVD. Yet, sad to say, the man who discovered Pam Grier and Ellen Burstyn has not made a movie since 1982's *Sorceress*, the Roger Corman–produced sword-and-sorcery fiasco that led to Hill's retirement from the industry. Nevertheless, the filmmaker continues to flirt with a return, although financing remains a major issue in a business in which directors are only as good as their last pictures. Much like his former colleague Monte Hellman—who was reduced to *Silent Night Deadly Night Part III* by 1989, and who has not directed a full-length feature since—Hill's work now seems etched in a time that has long since passed. This is in spite of the fact that Hill, again just like Hellman, has legions of new fans, and an increased name recognition, since his seventies heyday.

Rumors persist that the likes of *Foxy Brown* and *Spider Baby* will be remade, while Hill is trying to remake the four scripts that formed the basis for a quartet of Mexican-produced films starring Boris Karloff in the late 1960s. Joining him on this quest is an up-and-coming Hollywood director in his own right, Mark Atkins, who won some critical plaudits for his 2004 horror picture *Evil Eyes*, starring Udo Kier. Atkins counts himself as one of many who has been influenced and inspired by the films that Hill made. In addition, Hill continues to hold two scripts dear to his heart—a romantic comedy called *A Perfect*





Top: **Jack Hill with his first movie camera, an 8mm Bell & Howell Sportster, and his father on the deck of his sailboat, circa 1945.** ***Bottom:*** **Jack Hill, left, with *Gremlins* director Joe Dante in 2007 (courtesy of Elijah Drenner and Joe Dante).**



Jack Hill, left, with author Calum Waddell, center, and exploitation legend Don Edmonds (*Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*) during the author's birthday celebration in Los Angeles, October 2007 (courtesy Elijah Drenner).

Wife and an action thriller named *Tangiers* (which dates to the 1970s and was originally intended as his follow-up to *Switchblade Sisters*). One hopes that both will see the light of a cinema projector.

Speaking with Hill today, one never gets the impression that he is in any way regretful that his filmmaking career never took off to the stratospheric heights of his old Corman colleagues Francis Ford Coppola, Peter Bogdanovich and Martin Scorsese. Rather, he seems proud of what he did get to make — and why shouldn't he? In a fiercely competitive industry, Hill scored a large number of commercial hits while his flops, such as *Spider Baby* and *Switchblade Sisters*, are now certified cult classics — the former attracting the vocal admiration

of Joe Dante, the director behind such modern masterworks as *The Howling* (1981), *Gremlins* (1984) and *The 'burbs* (1989). Moreover, one also has to give Rob Zombie, the erstwhile heavy metal rocker, credit: his *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003) and *The Devil's Rejects* (2005) were springboards for the career resurrection of Hill regular Sid Haig, possibly the most unexpected big screen return of the millennium so far.

It is my intention, in writing this book, to give a critique of all of Hill's films— but, in doing so, I have also chosen to present a number of Q & A sessions with the director. The reason for this is simply that I have always enjoyed the format of interviews. It feels, when reading these, that a conversation is actually "flowing" and "moving" on the page.

The time is right for this book. With the 2007 release of the Quentin Tarantino–Robert Rodriguez opus *Grindhouse*, it is inevitable that more fans will go back and explore the low-budget cinema of yesteryear. Jack Hill may never have set out to be the King of the Grindhouse but, whether he likes it or not, this is ultimately what he will be best remembered as. Luckily for him, however, many of his movies are good enough to stand on their own and, even today, hold up as exciting, innovative adventures in independent filmmaking.

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1
Beginnings

Jack Hill was born into film thanks to his father Roland E. Hill, who worked for a variety of big-name studios, building sets and later assisting on the construction of key Disneyland attractions. "Sometimes my father would bring scripts home and I would read them but it wasn't until I got into university that I really got into film," admits Hill, who also recalls editing and directing 8mm efforts as a child — albeit as nothing more than a "bit of fun."

Would you speak a little about some of your dad's achievements?

He started at First National Studios around 1924 and then stayed on when it became Warner Bros. and worked there as a set designer and eventually art director until the consent decree shut down the studios' in-house design facilities. Then he did some TV and eventually went to Disney, which still had an in-house factory. He built Tom Sawyer's Island and much of Main Street at Disneyland. He also designed the interiors of the *Nautilus* for *20000 Leagues Under the Sea* and specialized in European, period architecture, castles and ships. For instance, he did the Captain Hornblower ships.

Did your father have a good relationship with Walt during his Disney days?

My father always spoke of Walt with the greatest respect. He said Walt was very friendly, interested in what everybody was doing, and expressed approval when he liked something. Only, oddly enough, he once gave my father what he was led to believe was an autographed picture of Mickey Mouse and, long after my father's death, it was determined to be just a printed signature. But he was a great man, no question. I once recorded on a score for one of his films and he came by just to enjoy the music. Over and over again, Walt went ahead with projects that everybody else thought were folly but which ended up being great successes. When my dad was working on Disneyland, another project widely believed to be folly, he was confident enough to buy stock in the Disney Company — and that turned out to be the smartest financial decision he ever made.

When Hill attended UCLA, his talents as a filmmaker were spotted by Dorothy Arzner, the only female director who worked in Hollywood during the

"golden age" of cinema. Arzner's credits include Working Girls *(1931),* Craig's Wife *(1936) and the Joan Crawford vehicle* The Bride Wore Red *(1937). In Hill's class during his UCLA days was Francis Ford Coppola, and the two became good friends.*

How long were you at UCLA?

I was there for several years. Originally I did a couple of years of college and then left because I wanted to get married, but I went back and did two years as a postgraduate. I had a major in music and a minor in theatre. I got my degree in music and worked as a performer, as a recording artist and even played a couple of concerts as part of the symphony orchestra. I also played on *Doctor Zhivago*.

However, you don't have a credit on the movie.

Well, I was part of a 101-piece orchestra and you didn't get credit in those days. I worked on *Doctor Zhivago* while I was still in UCLA. I also worked on *The Brothers Karamazov*—they put out a record of me playing the love scene from that film. I still have a 45 of the record at home. Interestingly, I was also arranging music for burlesque artists and Lenny Bruce was a burlesque comic at the time. He had his wife and his little baby daughter [Kitty Bruce] who grew up to act in my film *Switchblade Sisters*.

You made your short film *The Host* while at UCLA. What is the genesis of this project?

It really began when Dorothy Arzner spotted Francis and me and backed us both very strongly. We got to do some student films at college and I worked as a cameraman, a sound recorder and an editor. Dorothy was teaching at the time at the Pasadena Playhouse, which is where Sid Haig was a student, and she recommended him to me, which is how we met and how he came to be in *The Host*. She had very high hopes for him. Francis went on to name his theatre in San Francisco the Dorothy Arzner Theatre.

You and Francis were close friends back then, right?

Sure, we worked on each other's student films. I did the sound on his, *Ayamonn the Terrible*—it was about an Irish sculptor named Ayamonn who does nothing but self-portraits. It's a comedy and quite funny actually.

Did Francis work on *The Host*?

I don't recall. I know that he worked on my directing assignment, which was a 15-minute film. It was called *Watch for 65* and it's about an experiment in creating a character that you never see on screen. It is a three-character film. One is a police detective and [another is] a taxi driver who is identified by his cab number, which is 65. They are communicating with him to warn him that he might have a murderer in his cab. The whole thing takes place over a radio. It was never finished, it was just a directing assignment. If you did well with

your directing assignment you would have a shot at being able to do a major production and only three people got to do that. Francis and I were two of them.

The Host *(1961) was finally released to the public as part of the extra features on the Miramax DVD of* Switchblade Sisters*, which hit shelves in May 2000. Quentin Tarantino paid to have the movie finished, with new titles, sound recording and music added to the production.*

The Host *is a striking mini–Western which begins in the California desert and stars a young Sid Haig, who will be almost unrecognizable to viewers who are only familiar with the actor from his career resurrection in* House of 1000 Corpses *(2003),* The Devil's Rejects *(2005) and* Night of the Living Dead 3D *(2007). Haig, on horseback, stumbles across a small village where he meets a beautiful young girl (Sharon Bercutt) and comes under gunfire from a lone man named only as "the Spaniard" (Joseph Hanwright). The girl explains to Haig, "My people are hungry" and then states that the Spaniard is the reason. However, it turns out that the villagers blame their "god" when the crops fail. At the moment, the Spaniard represents their "god" and the villagers want to sacrifice him, cut him up into pieces and plant him in the fields to ensure fertility. Promised the opportunity to lord over the people, Haig agrees to murder the Spaniard and enjoys his subsequent position in the village — even hinting to the girl that he might sleep with her. However, when his horse is taken and he has no way to leave the town, his thoughts are different — for he is the new "god," responsible for the crops flourishing and answerable by death if they fail.*

The Host *is most notable for having some resemblance to the final act of Coppola's masterpiece* Apocalypse Now *(1979), in which Martin Sheen slaughters Marlon Brando as a group of third world villagers (who have begun to see Brando as a god) look on. Sheen is then accepted as their leader, although he neglects the role and quietly travels up-river with the one surviving member of his squadron. Although Hill's short is, inevitably, not on a par with the majesty and ambition of* Apocalypse Now*, it does serve as an interesting no-budget comparison. Most fascinating is the way in which Haig's act of violence is not treated as euphoric. Rather, it is seen as something inhumane, a soul-destroying act from which there is no return to normality. Not only does this bear comparison to Sheen's murder of Brando in the Coppola picture but it effectively foreshadows Pam Grier's assassin-with-a-conscience in Hill's later* Coffy *and* Foxy Brown.

What inspired *The Host*?

I had been reading James Frazer, the British writer who is very famous, and I had enjoyed his best-known book, *The Golden Bough*; in fact, my writing teacher said of *The Host*, "This is the story that Frazer forgot to tell." It was influenced by his writing and if you see *Apocalypse Now* and look at the very last act of the movie, the camera explores Kurtz's hideaway and you see a stack of books on his shelf. Very prominently featured there is *The Golden Bough*.

When I saw the movie, my jaw dropped because Francis knew very well that my story was adapted from that.

Did you enjoy *Apocalypse Now*?

The third act didn't work but that was mine — that was my story [*laughs*]. But, yeah, I liked it. John Milius wrote the script and Francis thought it was great but he did not like the ending. In fact, he didn't come up with the right ending until he was over in the Philippines shooting it. So he knew my student film very well and I got this straight from Steve Burum who is one of the top cameramen in the business. He was my cameraman on *The Host* and he was the second unit cameraman on *Apocalypse Now* and he said, "We were all laughing and saying that we were doing Jack Hill's student film."

Did you have any bitterness when Coppola went on to become the toast of Hollywood?

No, not at all. At the time I was not really serious about my career. Francis from the very beginning knew exactly what he was going to do — he was going to be the biggest thing in Hollywood. I just never had that attitude towards films — I never went and got an agent or anything. I just sort of fell into directing and took what came. Francis combined real talent with having a real business sense, which he learned growing up in New York. We lost touch when he went on to working with major studios and I was still doing Roger Corman films — it is a different world. I don't remember the last time I saw him. I would run into him occasionally at functions but we were in different universes.

Do you think you could have tackled something as epic as *The Godfather*?

I don't know. A lot of the excess violence in that film kind of sickened me. I don't think I could have cut off a horse's head and put it in someone's bed in a movie. But sometimes I wonder — would I have rather made *Coffy* than *The Godfather*? I cannot just right away say no to that because, over time, I feel very satisfied with my career. I mean, in the first place you have to realize that when *The Godfather* was just starting out, no one expected it to be anything but this cheapo gangster movie and Francis had the drive and the ability to persuade people otherwise. I mean, he could persuade people about anything. I have seen him do it and he was very good at it. I really admire him for it.

Why was *The Host* not finished back in 1960?

The reason I could not finish it was simply because I did not have the money to do it. You had to pay for that yourself.

Can you take me through the film's completion under Quentin Tarantino?

Quentin put it on the DVD of *Switchblade Sisters* to show people how my student film ended up becoming the third act for *Apocalypse Now*. To do that, he paid to have it finished — I just had this work print with inserts missing and a few lines of dialogue missing. It had been sitting in my garage for thirty years

and Quentin wanted to put in on the DVD. I didn't know if the soundtrack had dissolved over time or if the picture was any good — it was all scratched and stepped on. But with the miracles of modern technology they restored that, and the soundtrack and picture were fine and Miramax paid to have sound effects and a music track done. We even got back two of the actors, including Sid Haig, and it finally got finished after 30 years. One of the guys that worked on it said to me, "Now I can say that I have worked on Jack Hill's student film and I wasn't even born when it was made!" [*Laughs*] It was a lot of fun.

Next up for Hill was some work on Coppola's 3D softcore sex romp The Bellboy and the Playgirls *(1962)— in reality a German-made picture in which the future* Godfather *director inserted some teased-at nude footage. Shortly after this, both Coppola and Hill would work for Roger Corman, the legendary producer who seemed to have the ability to spot talent from a mile away. Hill's work for Corman included directing, without credit, a new introductory section to the no-budget monster movie* The Wasp Woman *(1960— with Hill's scenes shot in 1962) and adding some new footage to Coppola's gothic murder-mystery* Dementia 13 *(1963). For* Dementia 13, *Hill would shoot some fresh sequences with his future* Spider Baby *co-star Karl Schanzer, himself also employed by Corman at the time and friends with Coppola.*

After completing his work on Dementia 13, *Hill shot some additional scenes for* The Terror *(1963), the notoriously troubled, and frankly redundant, horror cheapie that starred Boris Karloff, Jack Nicholson, and Dick Miller. As Corman himself explains, "What happened with* The Terror *was that I had a little bit of money and free time. After doing one of the Poe pictures [*The Raven, *1963], I hired Boris Karloff to work two days on the sets that had been built for it. Then I brought in Jack Nicholson to play the lead and I told Jack that all I had was the two days. The script was conceived very quickly over a weekend [laughs] and we would then shoot the rest of the picture once I had some more money and completed the script. So I shot about 30 pages in two days. I did some shots inside a castle and then my ace assistant at the time, Francis Ford Coppola, came along about a month later and went up to Big Sur and shot a large portion of the picture. Then Francis got a better deal at a larger studio and everyone else worked in bits and pieces, developing the script and so forth, and then finally on the last day of shooting, Jack Nicholson came up to me and said, 'Roger, every idiot in town has directed a part of this picture. Let me direct the last day.' [Laughs]. I said, 'Fine, Jack, here you go.' The weird thing is that the picture does not make a great deal of sense but every director brought a new style and modified the script but, weirdly enough, that picture has been successful and some critics have even taken it seriously. None of us took it seriously [laughs]." Hill, Monte Hellman and Nicholson himself would complete the picture.*

You and Francis graduated from university at the same time, right?

Yeah. Francis was doing these nudie-cuties and I worked with him on

those. I did camera work and sound on one called *The Bellboy and the Playgirls* and we edited them together. Then Coppola went to Roger Corman and then he brought me in to do camerawork with him because I had done that on his directing film at university and he liked what I did. So I worked with Corman and Coppola left. I think *Patton* was Coppola's first big writing job.

The Wasp Woman was your first job for Corman, right?

Yeah, *The Wasp Woman* came after *The Bellboy and the Playgirls*. At the time, Roger was selling his titles to television but they were a little bit short, [so] he needed additional running time. So all I did was write some extra material to increase the running time by 20 minutes, using the only actor they still had available who had been in the film, a guy called Michael Mark. I also shot some stuff with Karl Schanzer. I then directed the additional ... few brief moments. I created a little introduction to the movie that set up the whole story.

Can you tell me about your work on _Dementia 13_?

I didn't do much directing on that. Again, the movie was just too short so I created a new character, played by Karl Schanzer, and put him in and I added a scene where someone gets their head cut off because it was a little short of violence [*laughs*]. I did a lot of pick-ups—pieces that were missing that had to then fit in.

And then there was _The Terror_.

I directed some of the looping on that film but apart from that I did the sound recording, editing and wrote some new scenes. I basically took over the picture and wrote a lot of new material. Monte Hellman directed most of this new stuff, I didn't do very many. Monte was also a very good editor—he did a lot of editing for Roger.

Roger shot three days with Boris Karloff and the script wasn't really finished—there wasn't much of a story. What happened was that Francis wrote a new script which didn't really make a lot of sense, to tell you the truth, but so many of Roger's pictures didn't make sense so nobody really cared. We shot a lot of it up at Big Sur in Southern California, which was really beautiful. A major part of the story was day-for-night and [Roger] forgot to tell the cameraman that it was day-for-night so a lot of it ended up being unusable. As a result, it needed to be done all over, but since it didn't make any sense anyway, Roger just turned it over to me to salvage what I could and write a new script that would make some sense. So I did and Monte Hellman finished off directing it and then I took over finishing it, doing pick-ups and inserts and making it fit. One scene that I wrote actually got audience applause—it was the scene where Jonathan Haze is supposed to be voiceless and, in order to make the story work, he had to whisper. It was the scene where he is walking around the top of a cliff and there is this mysterious hawk we see once in a while throughout

the movie. Since Jonathan knows too much, this hawk swoops down from the sky, right into his face, and gouges out his eyes. Then Jonathan walks right out over the cliff and this caused a lot of applause. That was my first cheer!

Did you work with Jack Nicholson much on *The Terror*?

No, I just directed his dialogue, basically.

Did Nicholson strike you as someone who would go on to be a great star?

Not particularly — I thought Jack Nicholson was a terrible actor at the time and only later realized that he had been terribly miscast. I changed my mind when I saw him in *Little Shop of Horrors*. Then I saw what a terrific actor he really was. He was not taking *The Terror* very seriously at the time, at least in my opinion. He felt he was being put upon with a lot of things he was being called on to do. But he did his job, he did very well, he was just totally wrong for the part. I was just wrong about him — he turned out to be a very good actor but in that particular role and under these circumstances he just wasn't taking things very seriously.

Did you work with Boris Karloff at all?

No, Roger shot all of the scenes with Boris on a soundstage that was left over from [*The Raven*] and I was not involved with that at all.

2
The First Films

Spider Baby (1964)

AKA: *The Maddest Story Ever Told*

Jack Hill: Director-writer-editor

Cast: Lon Chaney Jr. (Bruno), Carol Ohmart (Emily Howe), Quinn K. Redeker (Peter Howe), Beverly Washburn (Elizabeth), Jill Banner (Virginia), Sid Haig (Ralph), Mary Mitchel (Ann), Karl Schanzer (Schlocker), Mantan Moreland (Messenger)

Producers: Gil Lasky, Paul Monka

Plot: The Merrye Syndrome is a "progressive age regression — beginning at the tenth year." It eventually results in "a pre-human condition that can result in cannibalism." There has been only one known occurrence of this disability ("an unfortunate result of inbreeding," we are told) and that is the basis of *Spider Baby* — wherein we are introduced to three teenagers (Elizabeth, Virginia and a mute, backward boy called Ralph) who are living in a dilapidated country mansion with their guardian Bruno. Virginia believes that she is a spider; and traps "bugs" in her spider web — even when they take the form of the local postman. When four guests stop by the house — including the children's new legal guardians Peter and Emily Howe — all hell breaks loose. Before the night is over, there will be an unforgettable luncheon, cold-blooded murder and, of course, spiders...

About the Film: "This has gone well beyond the boundaries of prudence and good taste." — Schlocker (*Karl Schanzer*) The era that gave birth to *Spider Baby* was also, arguably, the most revolutionary time for the horror film, with titles such as Michael Powell's initially dismissed *Peeping Tom* (1959) and Alfred Hitchcock's immortal *Psycho* (1960) attempting to drag the genre into the realism of the present-day and away from the confines of the supernatural. Meanwhile, the success of Hammer's 1957 production *The Curse of Frankenstein* — which showcased moments of bloody special effects for the first time — encouraged the production of increasingly gruesome features. It did not take long for the floodgates to open. The first sign of a more explicit nastiness came

Jack Hill, right, directs the legendary Lon Chaney in *Spider Baby* (courtesy Karl Schanzer).

with the classic Italian feature *Mask of Satan* (1960, AKA *Black Sunday*), which was directed by the legendary Mario Bava. *Mask of Satan* may have been shot in black-and-white but its onscreen shots of a bound, tortured female and spurting blood far outdid anything in *The Curse of Frankenstein*. Even Hitchcock himself wasn't above showcasing the occasional bout of bloody excess—as his later hit *The Birds* (1963) demonstrated—although the birth of the first genuine "splatter" movie was just around the corner...

Nineteen sixty-three's *Blood Feast* remains the archetypal gore movie and, perhaps inadvertently, a genuine trendsetter. Directed by Herschell Gordon Lewis and produced by David Friedman, the film was banned outright in many countries, including the UK, and created a legend during its run at drive-in and grindhouse cinemas throughout North America. Although Bava, Hammer and Hitchcock had pushed the boundaries of cinematic violence, nothing could prepare audiences for *Blood Feast*, which served up brains bashed in, tongues pulled out and legs cut off, all in horrific, unflinching detail. All this—and garish color photography as well—made *Blood Feast* an instant hit and, alongside *Psycho*, paved the way for the genre's cultural and commercial renaissance with

such landmark, and far superior, titles as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Last House on the Left* (1972) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). In the meantime, *Blood Feast*'s impact was almost immediate. Bava himself increased the level of gore and violence in his 1964 effort *Blood and Black Lace*, and set the plot in contemporary times, while Lewis and Friedman quickly rushed into production with *Two Thousand Maniacs!* (1964) and *Color Me Blood Red* (1965).

Although Hill's work in the horror field lacked the cynical bloodletting and coldhearted misogyny of that of Lewis and Friedman, the filmmaker still had a lot in common with the two notorious purveyors of blood and boobs. Not only was Hill producing low-budget product for the drive-in market, also occupied by Lewis and Friedman, but the director was familiar with working with no money and short shooting schedules under Roger Corman. It is not too far-fetched to say that Corman was to Hill what Friedman was to Lewis—and, just as the *Blood Feast* director would experience problems with distribution when his longtime friend and producer left him, so too would Hill encounter difficulties in securing a release for such early works as *Spider Baby* and his later *Mondo Keyhole*.

Nevertheless, Hill's experience with Corman obviously served him well when it came to making *Spider Baby*, which according to the director cost a mere "$65,000 on a 12-day shoot." Furthermore, for his first feature effort Hill crafted a strange little story that was totally out of sync with its own genre. Unfortunately, the movie would not be released until 1968. Hence, if *Psycho* and *Blood Feast* were the modern face of terror, and indicated the direction that the horror film would take, *Spider Baby* is more reflective of what came before—a throwback to a more innocent time where graphic misogyny, gore and serial killers had yet to cast their shadow over the genre. Even so, as at least one critic has pointed out, the movie still manages to embrace "such outré themes as retardation, cannibalism and dysfunctional family values."[1] As a result, although *Spider Baby* manages to appear quintessentially "classic" (right down to the presence of old Lon Chaney Jr. and its creaky, gothic sets), underneath its exterior of paying homage to the golden days of Universal terror is something far more subversive. Nevertheless, the end result is curiously un-commercial—almost as if Hill deliberately set out to make a film that was so out of sync with its time that anonymity would be guaranteed. Even now the picture seems to throw contemporary critics a curveball—described on the one hand as "a cinematic curiosity ... criminally neglected ... the film is really too artful and witty to be enjoyed as wholly camp"[2] and on the other as "a bad movie so bizarre, it's fascinating."[3] Perhaps this is what makes *Spider Baby* so intriguing: Just as one person can see it as an "art" film, another can simply write it off as "a bad movie." As a result, the feature's cult reputation seems almost certain to last. It is truly an experience that one either embraces or something so out-of-left-field and strange that falling under its noir-tinged spell is virtually impossible.

Certainly, because it was made during a period when horror movies were

gorier, grittier and even grimier than ever before, *Spider Baby* seems more akin to the sort of feature that audiences may have expected to see during the 1930s or '40s (although the revelation that the Merrye children keep their father's corpse hidden out of sight no doubt owes its debt to *Psycho*). For instance, every act of violence in *Spider Baby* takes place off-screen, with the sole exception of someone's ear hitting the ground during a brief murder sequence, and the movie's comical tone bears a striking resemblance to the campy feel of some of the later Universal productions such as *Abbot and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948). Indeed, while post–*Psycho* horror movies were striving to be serious and scary (the reason that *Blood Feast* fails in this aspect is because it is so badly made), *Spider Baby* does the exact opposite, making a deliberate joke out of its horror and inviting the audience to laugh along with its host of bizarre onscreen personalities.

However, *Spider Baby* is still perhaps the archetypal Jack Hill movie. It feels disjointed and dreamlike — with an "old dark house" plot which, at first, seems hackneyed but soon spirals in a direction that is unique. The story plays out as if beamed from another universe entirely — and, on the whole, the film is incredibly knowing and unapologetically silly (as witnessed from the preposterous Lon Chaney–voiced theme song that plays over the opening credits to the ridiculous, closing coda — spoken, almost impossibly straight-faced, by actor Redeker). Furthermore, much of the acting is stilted, the dialogue is often forced and the characters are just plain weird ... yet this is a motion picture that still manages to make its eccentric cast of characters somehow seem plausible. Creating a living, breathing funhouse in the shape of the mansion lorded over by Chaney, the atmosphere of *Spider Baby* soon becomes so oppressively twisted that nothing seems too outlandish by the time the first reel has concluded. That said, there is still a stark humanity in the film — an aspect of Hill's work that remains present in even his grungiest efforts — and in *Spider Baby* it is best exemplified through the tired, lived-in face of star Lon Chaney.

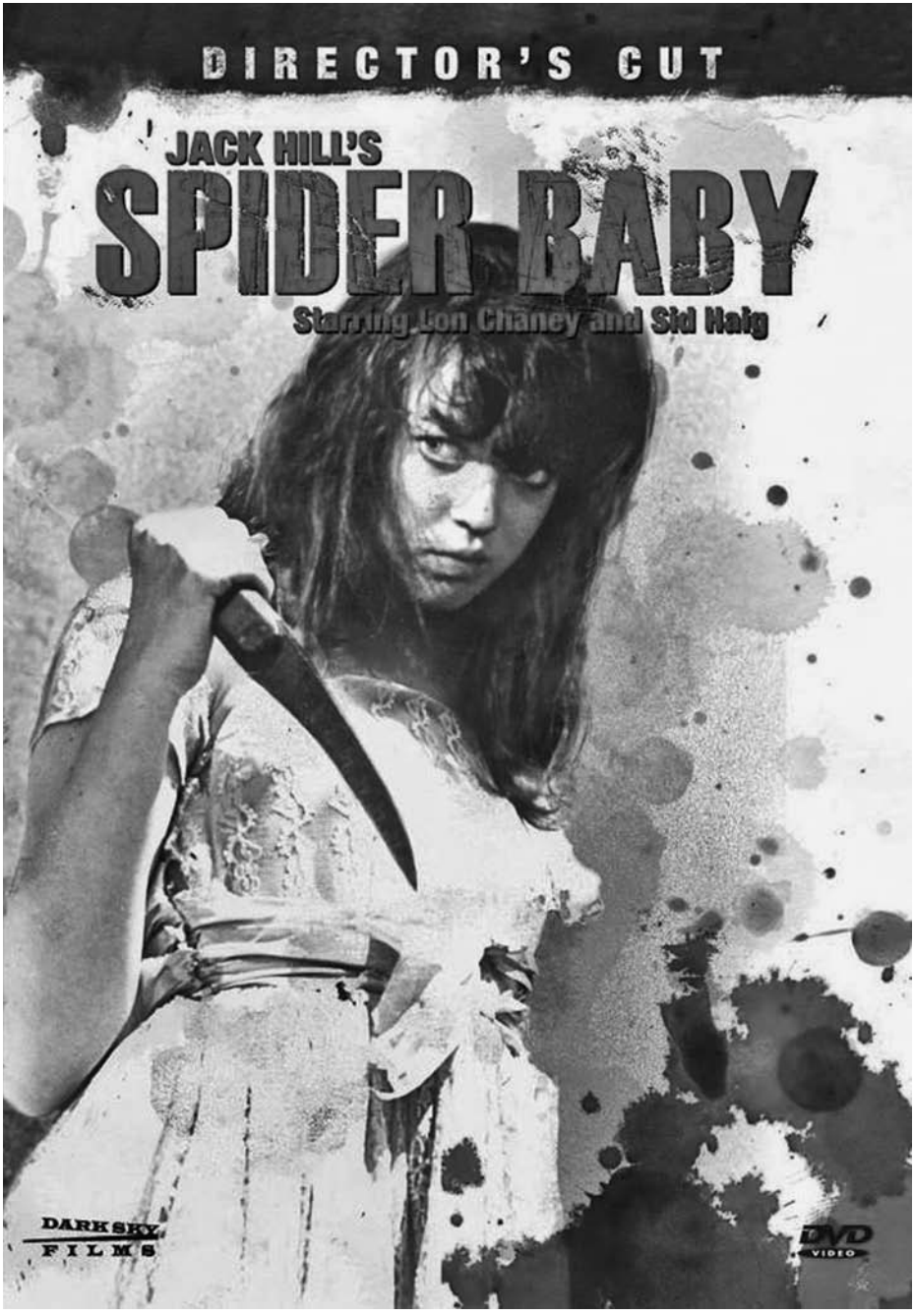
Going out on a limb, in *Spider Baby* Chaney arguably gives his finest, and perhaps his most personal performance. By this point in his career, the actor was largely viewed as a has-been, and his problems with alcoholism have been well documented. But — unlike the Ed Wood–Bela Lugosi relationship (which resulted in the dire exploitation of the *Dracula* star), Hill really gives Chaney a chance to shine. There is a real sadness in the actor's delivery, which only adds to his characterization of the doomed, exhausted chauffeur, Bruno. When he reiterates his most famous line, "There's going to be a full moon tonight" (and it is worth noting that this is an example of postmodern horror long before 1996's *Scream*), it is said with a painful resonance. It is as if Chaney is acknowledging that, yes, he never did escape the shadow of *The Wolf Man* and evolve into an A-list talent, instead, as his career comes to its close, here he is in a skid-row horror cheapie with a bunch of no-name actors. Yet Chaney's pained expressions permeate his *Spider Baby* role with the needed weariness that his

character demands—after all, Bruno has been given the thankless job of looking after three children who are mentally unstable and capable of cold-blooded murder. In other words, Bruno *should* look fed up, fragile and weary and, whether intentional or not, this is exactly what Chaney's mannerisms bring to the part. When he blows up his entire family in the picture's penultimate sequence, there is a sense of release that is strangely melancholic—perhaps because of the actor's real-life problems. Indeed, in this very moment, Chaney's own self-destruction becomes literal and the result is surprisingly poetic.

Spider Baby should also be addressed for being somewhat ahead of its time with its plot and themes. It is not too far-fetched to believe that a young Tobe Hooper may have been inspired by elements of the film—with Hill introducing a hellish, awkward dinner table scene, a backwards family and ghoulish relatives who are hidden away, out of sight, in the basement. This not only predates Hooper's own *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* but also *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) and Rob Zombie's *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003), which also featured *Spider Baby* star Sid Haig. In a sense, therefore, it is easy to see Hill's movie as the unaccepted father of the "backwoods" horror film—a sub-genre that also includes such tawdry efforts as 1980's *Mother's Day*, 1983's *Mountaintop Motel Massacre* and 1987's *American Gothic*. While *Spider Baby* does not contain the requisite terror, not to mention misogyny, of many of these titles, it does share their fascination with an unwashed, backward family that has lived outside of the rules and regulations of contemporary society for decades. Then, as with the aforementioned movies, its reprobates are forced into contact with the "outside" world and, inevitably, violence ensues.

Furthermore, just as Hooper takes the stereotype of the white trash redneck to vulgar extremes in *Chain Saw*, Hill takes the image of the rebellious 1960s youth and makes it lethal. The movie's two young girls, wonderfully portrayed by Beverly Washburn and Jill Banner, are unkempt enough to mirror the visuals of a typical "hippy chick" and their focus on disrupting the adult world (represented by their four well-groomed visitors) hardly needs further deliberation. It is, however, worth noting that these two femme fatales represent the earliest examples of the director's onscreen depiction of lurid, badass babes—something that, in *Spider Baby*'s era, was still quite unusual to see in the cinema.

The performance from actor Sid Haig, whose career would later be resurrected by musician-turned-filmmaker Rob Zombie, is also worth drawing attention to. His silent, creepy demeanor is both hilarious and uncomfortable—especially during the dinner table sequence wherein the lack of compatibility between the "civilized" family and Haig's anarchic Ralph, awkwardly dressed in an oversized Little Lord Fauntleroy suit, really becomes clear. Meanwhile, the aforementioned Washburn and Banner reveal a childish sexuality that is at once uncomfortable and, yet, also quite alluring—the natural beauty of the two and their slurred delivery makes them both unforgettable screen



The *Spider Baby* DVD cover.

sirens. Subsequently, it is interesting to note that Hill's "normal" characters are almost instantly forgettable. Again, as with Hooper's *Chain Saw* victims, or the faceless teen victims in *House of 1000 Corpses*, it is the so-called villains that make *Spider Baby* so memorable. It may also indicate Hill's sympathy towards the outsider or the misfit — a facet of his work that becomes especially evident in titles such as *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown* and *Switchblade Sisters*.

With a character named Mr. Schlocker, one obviously has some idea of what they can expect from *Spider Baby*. However, from the film's early murder of (a briefly seen) Mantan Moreland to its surreal ending and coda, the picture is full of surprises. This may have something to do with Hill's "everything but the kitchen sink" approach — dark comedy mixes with violent terror and gothic atmosphere tangles with kinky situations. But somehow the whole mess comes together well and results in one of the best horror films of its decade. Indeed, even patently moronic set pieces, such as Virginia's desire to "play spider," become plausible amidst the film's increasingly delusional atmosphere — something that is very unique to *Spider Baby*. Add to this mix such amusing, self-aware dialogue as "There is something terribly wrong here and I intend to find out what it is" and you have a sadly overlooked gem of a horror movie — and one which comes especially recommended to those who believe that they have seen it all.

Jack Hill's Memories of *Spider Baby*

How did you get involved with *Spider Baby*?

I was working for Roger, and I had met Karl Schanzer on these nudie-cutie things that I had done with Francis [Ford Coppola]. Francis wrote part of the scripts and I edited and filmed some of it — a film which was called *Tonight, For Sure*. Karl was working as a private investigator for these guys who eventually produced *Spider Baby*. They had been in the theatre department of UCLA at the same time and they always wanted to make movies. Karl was working for them and they had been reading a lot of scripts. They hadn't seen anything they liked and they asked Karl if he knew anybody who could help and he said that he knew somebody who had a story they might like. I showed them some footage from *Blood Bath* that I directed. At this point, *Spider Baby* wasn't a screenplay, it was just a story and they liked it because it was so different from anything else they had seen and so they basically contracted me to write the screenplay, direct and edit the movie. That is how *Spider Baby* happened.

Did you always have Lon Chaney in mind for the lead role?

Yeah, although Lon Chaney wanted too much money due to it being a horror picture. But our budget was only $65,000 and that was mostly spent. So Lon's agent initially rejected it but by that time Chaney himself had already read the script and approved it. In fact, he really badly wanted to do it but his agent

was holding out for more money, so we checked and found that John Carradine had the same agent. We called him and asked what Carradine's price was and the next day he called us back and said that Chaney wanted to do it.

I know you're a big fan of the old Universal horror movies so was it ever intimidating to work with one of your idols?

I wouldn't say that he was an idol but I always thought he was a great personality and he was established in that genre, which could only help the picture. I thought that he was a very good actor and I really visualised him doing comedy.

You got to work with Karloff and Chaney during your career. Do you ever wish you could have worked with Lugosi and made it a hat trick?

No, no. I didn't really have that kind of attitude. I was enamored of certain actors that I wanted to work with — but, for example, we mainly got Brian Donlevy for *Pit Stop* just because he was available and he was having a little bit of tax problems. Therefore he would work for money under the table. It wasn't because he was one of my favorite actors that we cast him. I never worked like that.

What about the animated, cartoon credits to *Spider Baby*— who came up with those?

They were designed by a fellow who had designed some other credits. The whole idea of doing the credits as a cartoon was that people would know from the beginning that this was a comedy and that it was okay to laugh.

Tell me about the rest of the *Spider Baby* cast — in particular the two lead girls, Beverly Washburn and Jill Banner.

Beverly Washburn was in *Old Yeller* and things like that as a child and she had been in many television and theatre shows. So here you had a 24-year-old actress with 20 years' experience. Jill hadn't done anything and she was only 17. So we lied and said she was 18 — because of the child laws— and they got along great together and worked so well together. The whole movie was tough to do but it was also a blast. The rest of the cast was just great. Jill Banner was later killed in a car crash on the Pacific Coast Highway. She was Marlon Brando's girlfriend at the time and Brando came to her funeral and he later said that she was the only woman he ever really loved. She was working on a screenplay with Brando at the time.

How did the B-movie actress Mary Mitchel get involved?

My production manager Bart Patton was married to Mary Mitchel. She had done some movies for Roger Corman — she had done a really great little movie for AIP called *Panic in Year Zero!* She was raped [in *Panic*] — she was always being raped in these films. Roger Corman referred to her as "the perfect victim." Anyway, her husband Bart Patton was a production manager and

he knew a lot of actors; Beverly Washburn was one person that he recommended. Mary just walked in, and we were seeing a lot of actors, and I don't know what her connection was but she just came in and she thought that she might get some sort of bit part or something. I still remember what she said at the audition, she said, "Well, the best thing about me is that I'm a lot of fun to have around." The way she said that—I and the producers said, "We have to take a chance on this girl." She was such a natural and she was perfect for it. It was just good luck...

Do you remember how you came up with the story for *Spider Baby*?

I can't remember. I wanted to do something with Sid Haig for one thing so maybe that was the chain of thought that led to that.

Beverly Washburn and Jill Banner also display a very adolescent sexuality. Did you ever see that as causing any controversy?

I never thought of it as being controversial. Why do you say that?

Mainly because they are not presented as adults and yet they are very sexually aggressive, they act like Lolitas...

I never thought of that as being anything but funny...

Yeah, but their characters mustn't be any older than 15, right?

I saw them as being even younger than that, actually [*laughs*]. Well, yeah, you don't really know...

The scene where Banner sits on Quinn K. Redeker's lap is very sexual, don't you think?

Yeah, that turned out to be a really erotic scene but I didn't see it as that at the time, I just thought it was amusing [*laughs*].

The theme of *Spider Baby* seems to be about holding together a troubled family through thick and thin.

I don't think I realized that this was the theme of the movie at the time. It was only later when young girls came up to me and said the movie meant so much to them that I figured that out. I gotta tell you, whenever someone asks me what I mean by this or mean by that, I have to admit that I was only trying to write a good story, not do something with any great meaning [*laughs*].

When did you notice that *Spider Baby* was gathering this huge cult following?

Just little by little, I guess, but I don't know. I started hearing about it when I got the video of it—maybe it was the mid eighties when it came out on video and started to get around. You see, as far as I knew it was lost. It was a horrible print on the video, you could hardly see anything, and I became determined to get a good copy of it out there so people could see it properly. Then I finally got a hold of a good print of it and that really helped. The reputation came from that.

So it was a surprise to you that people were still discovering it?

Yeah, but I didn't know this until years later. I never thought that I would ever even see the film again.

Tell me about when Lon Chaney says "There's going to be a full moon tonight" in tight closeup — acknowledging his role in *The Wolf Man* and offering a "wink" to the audience. This was postmodern horror long before *Scream* and really ahead of its time.

I just thought it would be funny. I never thought of it as being a groundbreaking move.

But you have to admit it was ahead of its time.

Yeah, but I didn't know... I hadn't seen it before but I didn't know.

***Spider Baby* came about just as Herschell Gordon Lewis was breaking new boundaries with onscreen gore — but yet your film is very restrained.**

Well, for me, horror and sex and violence are more powerful when you don't really quite see things or when it takes place off screen. Like in *Spider Baby*, the violence takes place off the screen — pretty much, anyway. When it comes to sex or violence, your imagination can provide you with much more than graphic visuals and that is the way I've always worked.

Did Lon drink at all during the production?

He stayed on the wagon, although I only found out afterwards that he had oranges that he used to like to eat. Sid knew, and he didn't tell me, but later on I found that he was spiking the oranges with vodka. But he didn't show it, he was up on top of everything until the last night.

Are you happy with how the film came out? Did you think that we would still be speaking about it over 40 years later?

No, I didn't think it would become a classic but I thought that we had a movie which would be successful in the theatres and we all thought it was going to be a hit. I even wrote a sequel to it at the time I was cutting it.

How did the distribution problems begin?

Well, the producers panicked after a test screening and cut off the whole Mantan Moreland scene so the film was missing its opening. That was when I began to get upset.

Why did they cut the opening out?

Well, when the picture was finished, we wanted to get a sneak preview on it so that we could try it out with an audience. In order to get it previewed, however, we had to get it screened for the theatre people. We went to screen it for them and it was late in the afternoon and they had just sat through a long movie and so they put our movie up and it was about 15 minutes in when they got up and left. Now, they had to get home for dinner — all they were seeing

was enough to know if they wanted to put the movie in a sneak preview. That was all they needed, they wanted to get home as soon as possible. But the producers panicked and said, "Oh my God, they've walked out, we need to do something." So their idea of "doing something" was to cut the whole opening Mantan Moreland scene, which I objected to, but I agreed to do it because if I didn't do it, then somebody else would and the damage might have been irreparable. So I made the cut in such a way that it could be restored. However, that was the version of the movie that they sent to New York, to the distributors, but nobody would buy it. By that time it was too late.

Why did it take until 1968 for it to come out?

That was when a guy called Dave Hewitt, who had been a friend of mine, got involved. He had seen the movie when it was finished and he always wanted to distribute it so he kept track of it and when the bankruptcy was settled and the picture was available, he got it for distribution. Then when he screened it, he was absolutely shocked to see what had been done to it and he restored it.

So you finally got your vision out there.

Yeah, when it was sent to New York, it was the mutilated version. I mean, if you saw it, you would wonder what had happened. I have seen this sort of thing happen to other movies— the producers just panic and all they do when they panic is begin to cut. But then [the movie] doesn't make any sense.

What is happening with the much-rumored *Spider Baby* remake?

Well, it is in turnaround at the moment. The way I understand it is that the studio said they didn't want an R-rated movie and asked if it could be turned into a PG. Doing that was difficult because of the subject matter and I believe they did a re-write on it and by that time, what often happens is that it is not a brand new script that everyone is excited about any more. Instead, by the time it has gone through a re-write, everyone has new projects they are excited about and they kind of let it dissolve. It is in turnaround, however, and I know the writer is taking it to other places but I am honestly not interested enough to know where he is with it.

Actor Karl Schanzer's memories of *Spider Baby*

Was acting what you wanted to do?

I have done everything inside and outside of the entertainment industry [*laughs*]. My first acting job was on the stage but before and after that I was a private detective on the West Coast. I was also an actor, out of work mostly, but I did do a third-rate road show for a few months and ended up back in the West. After that, I met Jack and because I also liked horror and science fiction we got along well. If I remember, I was introduced to Jack through another friend when he was still at college at UCLA. Francis Coppola was also there and Jack and I met and just got along well together. So we began working together —

it started off being on little pictures that were done for Roger Corman. I did a number of jobs for Corman—continuity writer, I even held the mike for a while—but that was the one thing about Roger: He would have a job for you if you could work.

Then Jack and I did some work on one of Francis's films, *Dementia 13*. They shot a lot of that film in LA and Jack cast me in it. We did that and then I went into being a private detective and after the job was finished, the guys who hired me sat around talking and they said, "What do you do when you're not doing this?" I said I was an actor and they told me, "Well, we've always wanted to be producers." So I said, "In which case I have someone that you should meet." You see, I knew that Jack had a project and they got together with him and financed *Spider Baby*. Of course, I did a part in it and I think it was one of the worst jobs that I ever did.

Why do you think that?

Well, I was unhappy because I thought I had overdone it. But people seem to like the character. One incredibly funny incident happened one night when we were showing it at one of the art theatres in LA. I think it was a midnight screening and I noticed this very strange fellow looking at me and I tried to ignore him. Well, a little while later I went to the men's room and I was standing at the urinal when I heard the door open and this guy snuck up behind me. I thought, "Oh boy, what a terrible time for this to happen." Then, when he got to my shoulder, he said very softly, "What was it like to work with Lon Chaney?" [*Laughs*] The people who like that show really run the gamut.

I was actually going to ask you that exact same question: What *was* it like to work with Lon Chaney?

Oh, he was a marvelous fellow. We used to spend a lot of time in his trailer talking and Lon was on the wagon. He would look at his watch now and again—I think he allowed himself one beer but only every few hours. He told me so many wonderful stories.

And what are your memories of *Spider Baby*'s two leading ladies, Beverly Washburn and Jill Banner?

Beverly was a consummate pro—always on time and always knew her lines. She was a good actress. Then there was Jill, who was a strange girl [*laughs*]. Sometimes I had the feeling she was a little like the character she played. I think she was 17 at the time and it was the first film she had acted in. She did a beautiful job and, as it turned out, it would be the last film she acted in. She had a strange life and I think she was attracted to strange people. She died quite young. To me, she just drifted into my life like a butterfly and then went out the other door. But she was fun to work with and I wish I had known her better. A smart kid but weird...

Can you recall Jack's demeanor on the film?

Yeah, Jack stayed calm which was totally necessary on that shoot [*laughs*]. He always knew what he wanted and it was very seldom that he did not have a shot completely planned out in advance.

Did you enjoy shooting the famous dinner table sequence?

Oh yes, yes—when we were eating that dead cat [*laughs*].

Did that scene take a lot of work—a lot of retakes?

No. We only had a couple of retakes but nothing like you would expect with a scene like that. There were a lot of very complicated things going on but we all knew what we wanted to do and what we were supposed to do. Sitting across the table from Sid Haig and watching him gnaw at that imitation cat—he was just great [*laughs*]. At one point we couldn't work out what we could do to make Sid really look like an animal and someone said that we should break an egg and have the white of the egg running off his lips and onto his chin. It was a good idea but we never did it. I think Jack thought that would be a little bit too much.

Did you pay much attention to the trouble that went on after the film was finished? The cutting of the opening sequence and the botched distribution of the movie?

I knew there were various problems and it had turned into a mess but because I was just an actor, it all went over my head. I didn't really track it, to be honest—it wasn't part of my job. But I know that Quinn Redeker went on to have a pretty nice career. He had tremendous comedy timing, both then and later. Actually, looking back, all of us coming together was a very happy thing because we were all different types of actors and, yet, somehow it all worked out. The whole was better than the sum of the parts.

Are you surprised the movie lives on as a cult classic?

I'm amazed. I'm constantly amazed. I found out they were trying to make a musical out of it...! I mean, it was more of a lark than anything else. The strange conglomeration that went on is what I think did it. I certainly never expected it to become a cult film. To be honest, I think Jack is very underappreciated but the same thing that leads him towards making the pictures he does is also what has marginalized him. It's like science fiction—in the earlier part of the 20th century, the genre was considered to be crap although a lot of writers were honing their craft on it. In later years we saw some beautiful stuff—like what Philip Dick did—but only now is it being appreciated as the real art form that it is. I think that a lot of what Jack did is, unfortunately, going to go through the same period—which is to say that although he is not appreciated now, I think that he will be. I think his type of movie will be recognized as art and I think he will be seen as one of the leading practitioners.

Track of the Vampire (1966)

AKA: *Blood Bath*

Jack Hill: Co-director/co-writer (with Stephanie Rothman)

Cast: William Campbell (Antonio Sordi), Marissa Mathes (Daisy Allen), Sandra Knight (Donna Allen), Lori Saunders (Dorean), Karl Schanzer (Max), Biff Elliot (Café Manager), Sid Haig (Abdul), Jonathan Haze (Café Dweller), David Ackles (Carousel Operator), Patrick Magee (Jealous Husband)

Producers: Jack Hill, Roger Corman

Plot: Antonio Sordi is a painter of "dead red nudes"—pieces of art depicting slaughtered, naked women. His work causes controversy in a local cafe inhabited by some modern art lovers—women are eager to pose for him irregardless. The problem is that none of the ladies that Sordi paints ever returns from his gothic apartment, located at the top of a bell tower. This is because Sordi sometimes transforms into a vampire in the shape of a distant relative (also a painter) from the 15th century who was burned at the stake after being accused of witchcraft. The witness who assured the man's death all these centuries ago was his mistress Melizza, whose soul lives on in a painting in Sordi's apartment. Tormented by images of Melizza and her jarring laughter, the artist can find peace only by covering his new work in the spilled blood of his victims. However, not only is Sordi a life-draining vampire and deadly painter but he also enjoys turning his models into wax statues. This he does by propelling them into a hot wax pit located in the basement of his living quarters. After the disappearance of a beautiful local girl called Daisy, her sister Donna decides to investigate further, following the trail to Sordi's lair where the artist denies ever having seen the missing model. Knowing this is untrue, Donna teams up with Daisy's friend Max to get to the bottom of things. Meanwhile, Daisy's friend Dorian, who is in love with Sordi, is accosted by a strange man on the beach who tries to kill her...

About the film: "Are you suggesting that Sordi is a vampire who abducts women?"—Max (*Karl Schanzer*) *to Donna (Sandra Knight*). Although Hill finished directing the movie that would become *Track of the Vampire* before beginning his work on *Spider Baby*, the picture would be shelved and then taken out of his hands and completed by somebody else. Thus, while *Track of the Vampire* was "wrapped" by Hill in 1964, the film as we know it today was not finished until 1966—leading to some confusion over which is the director's real debut. The problems that the filmmaker encountered on this, his first shot at a feature-length project, would be repeated time and again during his career—and, in the case of the famously troubled *Ich, ein Groupie* and *Sorceress*, it would also be while employed on a Roger Corman picture. Therefore, while many great directors were launched by Corman, Hill is the only one who began and ended his career under the auspices of the producer and, in both cases, would walk away having had a thoroughly negative experience. In other words, Hill's career

comes full circle, and is effectively bookmarked, by two movies (*Track of the Vampire* and *Sorceress*) that were taken out of his hands and completed without his collaboration. In retrospect, it seems like a perverse feat of destiny and the sort of "Hollywood" story that one would be hard-pressed to invent.

Trying to get to the bottom of the history behind *Track of the Vampire* is likely only to cause a massive headache, although journalist Tim Lucas did an admirable job of tracing the project's genesis in a three-part investigation documented in his *Video Watchdog* magazine back in 1991. According to Lucas, *Track of the Vampire* began life in Yugoslavia where Roger Corman was attending the Pula Festival and obtained the opportunity to "acquire the rights to a Yugoslavian thriller about to begin production for only $20,000."[4] Asked to provide someone who could write English dialogue, alongside some English-speaking cast, Corman turned to Francis Ford Coppola, who was then wrapping up work on his minor classic *Dementia 13*. Taking actor William Campbell from Coppola's picture, the film — dubbed *Operacija Ticijan* (translated as *Operation Titian* and later named *Portrait of Terror*) was directed on-location by someone called Rados Novakovic — "a heck of a good director," according to Campbell.[5] However, the picture evidently did not meet Corman's standards and Hill was consulted to "deliver a releasable picture in five days, using a minimum of 30 minutes of an unreleasable Yugoslavian (feature) on a budget of no more than $900."[6] The result was a horror flick called *Blood Bath*, in which Campbell returned to appear in the new scenes. But according to the Lucas piece,[7] the differences in film stock between Hill's new picture and the previous *Operacija Ticijan* resulted in problems. Unfortunately, with Corman busy directing *The Secret Invasion* (1964) in Yugoslavia — and his brother Gene left in control of the studio — the *Blood Bath* project came to a dead end, with Hill leaving to make *Spider Baby*, the movie that he prefers to recognize as his official feature debut. This is, ultimately, when things become even more complex — with Stephanie Rothman (later the director-producer of 1970's *The Student Nurses*) being brought in to bring the project to a close, as Lucas explains:

> In the Spring of 1964, Rothman was handed all of the footage produced by Hill and Rados Novakovic, including some cans of miscellaneous Dubrovnik scenery, and asked if she could see a movie in it. She could see more than a movie in it: she could see a vampire movie in it. Rothman quickly signaled her intentions by retitling the project *Track of the Vampire*.[8]

Track of the Vampire is the version of *Blood Bath* that survives to this day — although Hill claims that the picture is still 80 percent his work (see the director's memories of *Track of the Vampire*). Certainly, it is not difficult to see what parts of the movie are Rothman's — with her ridiculous, not to mention infantile, vampire interludes largely disrupting the flow of the picture and featuring randomly in the plotline. The nadir of this insanity comes in a seemingly endless chase scene across a beach where a dark figure in a top hat flees after a would-be victim as a lifeguard appears to be looking on! The two finally struggle

in the water, with the man killing the helpless female — although both the idea of swimming vampires is ever-so-slightly puzzling, not to mention a lengthy attack in daylight, with onlookers captured by Rothman's hyperactive camerawork.

Still, if one can accept the preposterous vampire interludes (which also include an attack on a merry-go-round — again with several people apparently oblivious to the murder that is taking place near them), then *Track of the Vampire* has some moments to recommend it. First up is the murder of *Playboy* model Mathes; Hill turns up the suspense nicely en route to a deliciously sinister set piece in which she ends up in the artist's hot pit of wax. Although the scene is a little too timid to be really effective, it still shows a fine command of atmosphere on the part of Hill, while Campbell's performance is spot-on — hitting all the right notes and demonstrating a believable psychosis. Perhaps anticipating the dark comedy of *Spider Baby*, Hill also gives his first film a notable air of satire — not least in targeting the modern art scene (perhaps best represented by Andy Warhol). The sequence in which Sid Haig and Jonathan Haze begin to fawn over a painting that has been "improved" by Campbell's decision to haphazardly squirt some ketchup over the canvas is somewhat amusing — with such over-the-top dialogue as, "Yes it oozes, just like it was alive."

Also, as with *Spider Baby*, Hill's debt to classic horror films is noticeable. Campbell's passion for turning people into wax models obviously reflects the classic *Mystery of the Wax Museum* (1933), while the noir-tinged, shadow-filled gothic atmosphere aptly brings back memories of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1932) and even *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962). Not that *Track of the Vampire* is fit to lick the boots of any of these movies — but that is not entirely Hill's fault. Indeed, for a debut picture, some of the director's own scenes, such as the aforementioned murder of Mathes, are visually accomplished and well set up. However, if Rothman's vampire inserts were not bad enough, the film also suffers under some complicated re-editing for television in which "six minutes of filler — culled not only from *Operacija Ticijan* but also from Hill's aborted labors — was hastily assembled and appended."[9] The result is a sequence, which goes on for over three minutes, where actress Lori Saunders (later of the *Petticoat Junction* television series) poses and preens on the beach in her swimsuit. To say that this is an endurance test is putting things mildly; it is one of the most boring scenes of any film ever made and likely only to encourage the frivolous use of the fast-forward button when seen today.

Watched alongside *Portrait of Terror* (a slightly bastardized version of *Operacija Ticijan* which can currently be viewed on DVD), a selection of minor external location shots from Dubrovnik find themselves transported into *Track of the Vampire*. While certainly scenic, these distinctly European locations only succeed in confusing the California locale of Hill's picture. Amusingly, Rothman also attempts to use some of this material to set up a vampire attack in a swimming pool (yes, *another* murder in water!) wherein another group of

onlookers notices nothing at all, and the Dubrovnik architecture seems decidedly out of place. More interesting is the use of the clanging bells in the bell tower (as seen in *Portrait of Terror*) which Hill writes into his film by having Campbell live an isolated old apartment. Of course, the addition of the bells (which the actor states ring on the hour, every hour) cannot help but evoke images of Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Another interesting addition to *Track of the Vampire*, courtesy of footage filmed for *Portrait of Terror*, is the brief appearance of English actor Patrick Magee (who would go on to work with Kubrick on *A Clockwork Orange*), albeit with newly overdubbed lines. Whereas in *Portrait of Terror* Magee threatens Campbell's artist with a gun in order to obtain an original print from him, in *Track of the Vampire* he is apparently attempting to find out what became of his wife, who modeled for the young painter but never returned home. With some quick edits, Hill has Magee's character — now played by a double — fall through a trapdoor and to his doom in the wax. A final, gory close-up of the stand-in's face covered in molten wax concludes Magee's short-lived, and involuntary, appearance in *Track of the Vampire*. However, as a lesson in how to fill your feature with some low-budget filler, the actor's "cameo" is something to behold.

Track of the Vampire also features small roles for Jonathan Haze, of *The Little Shop of Horrors* fame, and Sid Haig, later a Hill regular. While neither is given much to do, it should still please fans of the two actors to see them together onscreen. *Spider Baby*'s Karl Schanzer also rears his head as an uptight art critic. Asked about the shooting of *Track of the Vampire*, the actor mentions:

> It was very strange. Jack was his usual self and we had a ball. There was one part of that where there had to be some kind of modern, expressionistic painting on the wall so Jack put a canvas on the floor, got up on a ladder and started splattering paint all over it [*laughs*]. We hung that up and that was the modern art. I remember that we had one scene on a bridge high above the city. Everybody thought that we were shooting it in Yugoslavia because Roger Corman had some outtakes from another film that he had done over there and we used all of them. So for months after I finished the film, people were asking how I liked Yugoslavia [*laughs*]. Well, Bill Campbell and I are fighting on this bridge high over the city and I am about 5'4" and Bill was a strapping 6'2" and we have this battle back and forth until I finally throw him off the bridge. I can't imagine anything more ridiculous [*laughs*]. However, Jack still came up with some interesting ideas. We had one scene where the vampire has a sudden vision or hallucination and we switch from his artist's studio to this vast unlit plane. Jack shot that in infrared which made for a really interesting effect.

Certainly, Hill's scenes in *Track of the Vampire* contain an undeniably professional shine — and, as the star of the film, Campbell approaches his role with notable seriousness, refusing to camp it up in the way that, one imagines, others may have done given such a poverty-stricken picture and hastily assembled shoot. This, alongside his lead role in *Dementia 13*, indicates a performer who

was more than worthy of evolving into bigger things that, unfortunately, never really materialized. Hill's female cast, meanwhile, does what is required of them in a perfunctionary, no-thrills manner. In light of this, it is surprising that starlet Saunders went on to have a career in the industry as she registers very little onscreen charisma in this early role. Furthermore, as classically beautiful as *Playboy* pin-up Mathes might be, her stilted acting skills only bring to mind the short-lived thespian career of *Blood Feast* babe Connie Mason and, as any B-movie connoisseur knows, that is not exactly a compliment. Strangely enough, however, the advertising for *Track of the Vampire* did nothing to exploit Mathes' turn as Miss June 1962 in the famous men's magazine. In comparison, *Blood Feast*—and the later *Two Thousand Maniacs!*—boldly highlighted Mason's Playmate stint in their theatrical posters.

While it is impossible to recommend *Track of the Vampire* as anything other than a fan-only curio, it is certainly weird enough to warrant its place in Hill's oeuvre. Unfortunately, this is largely down to Rothman's attempt to turn what might have been a fine psycho-thriller into a vampire flick. To say the end result is disjointed might be putting things lightly, but for Campbell's performance alone the movie isn't a total write-off.

Jack Hill's Memories of *Track of the Vampire*

What are your memories of making the film?

Basically, Francis [Ford Coppola] was in Yugoslavia where he was supposed to be supervising this horror movie that was being shot in English with some British actors. He had met this girl who was actually the girlfriend of his camera operator, who had been in UCLA at the same time as us. Well, he went over to Ireland to work on *Dementia 13* and he took his girlfriend with him — who Francis fell in love with and eventually married. So I heard this from people who were there that he was spending all of his time with this girl and he didn't, really supervise things. So when we got the picture back, it was not a horror movie it was just this really lousy suspense thriller called *Operation Titian*. So Roger assigned it to me and said, "Just salvage whatever footage you can." Then he gave me the actor, Bill Campbell, and he said, "See if you can turn this into a horror picture." So I salvaged a lot of great scenes from Dubrovnik, which were nice, and I wrote a new script to try and make use of that footage. I shot it but Roger was back in Yugoslavia shooting a *Dirty Dozen* movie in Dubrovnik [*The Secret Invasion*]. He had lost one of his stars and the funding for the movie was going to be pulled unless this actor would show up. However, Roger managed to get Mickey Rooney which was enough for United Artists to keep funding the movie. Well, at this particular time, I had finished shooting *Blood Bath* but Roger was holed up in a hotel room in Yugoslavia and he would not answer the door [*laughs*]. So Gene Corman just put the whole thing on hold and I went off to do *Spider Baby*. Then when Roger finished his

picture, Stephanie Rothman had come to work for him and he assigned it to her and she changed it into a vampire movie. I had more of a psychological thriller so I thought she just messed it up. You see, when Roger looked at the footage he thought that the look of the picture from Yugoslavia had a totally different look from what we shot. That could have been easily fixed during the editing but in his heart I think he just wanted two pictures instead of one. So he sold the Yugoslavian picture off as a second feature and ended up with another movie—*Blood Bath*—which was a complete picture. So, you see, I had been using quite a bit of footage from the Yugoslavian picture and when he decided not to use that the picture was too short and needed padded out. That is how Stephanie Rothman came in.

Can you say how much of the finished film is yours?

Most of it. I saw it recently for the first time and Stephanie put in this big, stupid chase scene near the beginning and shot some stuff with Sid Haig and a few of the other guys. The ending is hers, but I would say about 80 percent of it is mine.

Did you have fun working with Jonathan Haze?

Oh yeah, Jonathan was great. I see him every once in a while. We had worked on *The Terror* together too.

Did you cast Marissa Mathes because she had been a *Playboy* Playmate?

No, I never even knew about that. I got her because in those days, getting an actress to do anything that involved nudity, even if you never saw her breasts on the screen, was difficult. She had done some nude scenes for the people who had produced *The Bellboy and the Playgirls* so they recommended her. I hired her for that reason but it turned out that her husband was one of the hot rock music producers at that time. So she thought she was going to have this big career and she became a total pain in the ass. She was going to be bare-breasted on the set so that we could shoot her from behind and everything but she insisted on wearing pasties over her nipples so that people on the set wouldn't follow her home. It was just crazy. I remember her husband came in during lunchtime with a contract he wanted me to sign—about me not being allowed to tell people how much she was being paid and this kind of bullshit.

You begin the film by making us think she will feature prominently but then you suddenly kill her off. Was that your attempt to pay homage to, or to copy, *Psycho*?

No, it was nothing like that. If you are going to do a horror movie, you have to knock off a few people early on or else the audience is going to go out for popcorn [*laughs*].

Were you a fan of horror movies?

Oh yeah, and I was happy to be doing one. I would say this was more of

a suspense thriller though — in the *Psycho* tradition. To me a horror film is *Frankenstein*, *The Wolf Man*, *Dracula*...

Do you think the movie has much in common with the horror picture you made after it — namely, *Spider Baby*?

Well, there is something very much in common — I used the same sound stage in Glendale because it had a pit in it and there is a pit in both pictures. In *Blood Bath* the pit is full of wax.

Is *Spider Baby* what you consider to be your real directorial debut?

Yeah, because *Blood Bath* — or *Track of the Vampire* — was not a completed film on my part, you know? It was integrated with footage from another movie.

Do you remember the release of *Track of the Vampire*?

Yeah — it got released as the second half of a double bill and that was the last I heard about it.

Were you happy to leave Roger Corman at the time and move on to *Spider Baby*?

Yeah, particularly at that time because Corman was over in Yugoslavia, Gene was running the office and I was basically being laid off.

Mondo Keyhole (1966)

AKA: *The Worst Crime of All*

Jack Hill: Director (uncredited)-writer-editor-cinematographer

Cast: Nick Moriarty (Howard Thorne), Victoria Wren (Vicky), Cathy Crowfoot (The Crow), Christopher Winters (Vampire), Jack Hill (Bondage Submissive), Penelope Faith (Carol)

Producer: Ronald Graham/John Lamb

Plot: Howard Thorne runs a pornographic distribution company dedicated to bondage and rough sex. It seems that this filth has taken a nasty toll on his mind and after work he prowls the streets looking for lone women to rape. One woman he attacks in some woodland, another he attacks while she is taking a bath. Back home, his wife Vicky is addicted to heroin and becoming more depressed as her husband ignores her sexual advances. She eventually attends a fancy dress party and meets a stranger that she becomes attracted to. Thorne's attacks continue, although he soon picks the wrong woman to mess with.

About the film: "The motion picture that you are about to see presents a dramatized study of a man and a woman whose dreams and fantasies take on a life and a power of their own"—*Introductory narration.* With Hill under the impression that *Spider Baby* was never even going to receive a cinema release, he embarked upon measures to make some fast cash. In common with his

contemporaries in the arena of low-budget schlock (David Friedman, Russ Meyer, Doris Wishman, et al.), Hill turned to filming a series of nudist loops under the management of the producer-director John Lamb. They would later be edited into a full-length feature entitled *The Raw Ones* (1965). While nudist flicks dated back to such 1930s titles as *This Nude World* (1933) and *Elysia, Valley of the Nude* (1934), the form had recently seen some kind of resurgence through such minor moneymakers as *The Naked Venus* (1958) and the Doris Wishman–directed nudie-cutie *Nude on the Moon* (1961). For 1962's *Nature's Playmates*—a ridiculous story set in a Florida nudist colony—producer David Friedman claims, "*Nature's Playmates* in the Capri [theatre] earned back the total production, prints and advertising costs and then some."[10]

For Hill, making straightforward nudist loops—and splicing them into a full-length "documentary"—was not the most difficult way to make a living. In the pre–*Deep Throat* days of cinema, any nudity was sure to gain some kind of attention, with at least one critic noting:

> Many exploitation genres relied on nudity as a source of spectacle. Whether it was the sight of a woman giving birth or the fleeting glimpse of a skinny-dipper under the influence of marijuana, unclothed bodies packed them into theatres.[11]

Furthermore, true to the carnival spirit of many exploitation pictures of the decade, *The Raw Ones* was advertised with a "warning" that read, "You must be mature enough to understand and appreciate the boldest and best film ever made about one of the most controversial subjects in America today ... in order to see this most unbelievably startling motion picture!!" In reality, however, this so-called "startling motion picture" was nothing more than a bevy of hired models masquerading as real naturists—the kind of thing which most audiences had already had ample chance to see. Thus, *The Raw Ones*' anonymity should probably not be mourned. As mentioned by critic Roger Ebert:

> The nudist camp movies were one of the most pathetic and least significant of the 1950s subgenres, of interest largely because of the actors' difficulties in manipulating bath towels while standing in shrubbery. Their inevitable strong point was a volleyball game somewhat awkward by the need for the male actors to keep their backs to the camera.[12]

However, *The Raw Ones* did introduce Hill to the aforementioned John Lamb. Lamb had written, directed and produced a little-seen fantasy effort entitled *Mermaids of Tiburon* (1962) and his working relationship with Hill would blossom into the creation of *Mondo Keyhole*, which—like *Spider Baby*—was shot in black and white.

Mondo Keyhole was born at a time when Russ Meyer was riding the success of his rough, taboo-breaking hit *Lorna* (1964), a film that created controversy by featuring a somewhat eroticized rape scene. Meanwhile, Meyer's subsequent *Mudhoney* (1965), the David Friedman–produced roughie *The Defilers* (1965) and the Herschell Gordon Lewis horror shocker *Two Thousand*

Maniacs! (1964) were continuing to push the limits of what could be shown on screen in regards to nudity and violence. In this sort of climate, something salacious and sensational was going to be up against stiff competition at the box office. With *Mondo Keyhole*, Hill attempted to make a feature that would appeal to this new, thrill-seeking grindhouse audience. As if in reference to this growing tolerance for screen sex and violence, one of the characters in *Mondo Keyhole* is seen reading a newspaper article on producer David Friedman, with the feature on exploitation cinema's foremost name focused on in such detail that it cannot be dismissed as a mere accident.

Originally entitled *The Worst Crime of All*, and no doubt renamed *Mondo Keyhole* to cash in on such success stories as 1960's shockumentary *Mondo Cane* and 1966's Russ Meyer effort *Mondo Topless*,[13] the movie combines scenes of attractive women in various states of undress with the sort of rough sexual violence that Meyer had instigated in the aforementioned *Lorna* and *Mudhoney*. Interestingly, the hallucinatory aspects of *Mondo Keyhole*—best personified by its intrusive narratives and breaks for nonsensical, drug-like imagery—are also very much of the time. By 1966, for instance, the use of LSD among the youth of North America had become such a concern to both parents and government that the drug was officially banned. Naturally, many low-budget filmmakers attempted to cash in on this new controversy with resulting titles including *Hallucination Generation* (1966), *The Weird World of LSD* (1967) and the Jack Nicholson–penned *The Trip* (1967).

With *Mondo Keyhole*, Hill himself gets in on the action with a finale involving a drug-fueled party where LSD is dropped into a punch bowl. This makes the feature an effective cut-and-paste of the exploitation trends of the time (and perhaps anticipated the chemical excess of his subsequent *Ich, ein Groupie*). *Mondo Keyhole* even features two scenes of surprisingly explicit sadomasochism, something that is certainly unique for a release of this period (although nothing too shocking for those familiar with the Bettie Page loops of the previous decade). It is also interesting to note that, quite contrary to the very nature of the "roughie" genre, it is females dishing out the punishment rather than males in *Mondo Keyhole*. Similar instances of sadists in skirts would, of course, surface in the master-domination theatrics of Hill's own *The Big Doll House*, although in that instance it would be a woman dishing out "punishment" to other members of the fair sex. Another curious sight is that of a black woman dominating and whipping a tied-up white male (played by Hill himself)—a subversive image for the mid-sixties, as campy and dubious as it may appear when watched today.

Perhaps surprisingly, in light of the director's involvement with nudist loops, the nudity in *Mondo Keyhole* is only hinted at, and no nipples are ever seen on screen (even though the previous year's mainstream hit *The Pawnbroker*, which would be Oscar-nominated, showcased bare breasts in full widescreen). Typical of a nudie-cutie picture, Hill opts for his undressed females

to either cover their bare chests or to be filmed in such a way that somebody — or something — keeps their shame hidden. The ludicrous peak of this practice is probably the sequence where a nude lady takes a bath and, despite being shot from behind, has bubble bath foam carefully placed over her butt crack. Certainly, when viewed in our current, far more relaxed time, it only serves to remind the viewer of a far more innocent era.

Being that *Mondo Keyhole* is one of Hill's least seen efforts, a rundown of the plot is in order. Be warned, however, that trying to create on paper the bizarre impact may be an exercise in futility. A disjointed affair with random images, occasionally inspired camerawork, overdubbed voices and a smattering of one-shot amateur actors in the cast, the movie is certainly intriguing but not in any sort of positive way. It's a movie that appears to have been thrown together and which has precious little point and makes very little sense.

Mondo Keyhole begins with some truly ludicrous imagery accompanied by a stern voiceover. The two combine to create the atmosphere of a pretentious art school project rather than an actual commercial feature film — but the feeling that this is an attempt to appeal to a young, drug-happy audience is certainly evident from the get-go. For instance, the quickly edited visuals that are fed to us as the movie begins include a human skull, a closeup of a pulsating brain, a wristwatch dangled back and forth on a chain, blood running through a prosthetic brain and a woman, dressed in black, smiling as the camera swings and spins into her face. Then begins the exploitation of the drug panic that was topical of the time as the hardened voice of the film's anonymous narrator insists, "Some of the scenes you will see present so-called reality as we perceive it in our waking moments. Other scenes portray the mysterious fantasies of the mind — psychic contents, whose power rises from the dark depths of the unconscious psyche — finally bursting the surface of reality to overwhelm and destroy." There is little that can be added to such a muddled commentary, except — of course — that any lofty pretensions which this sort of nonsense might claim to have is soon vaporized by the quality of the movie that follows.

From here comes a quote from Freud: "For crimes committed in the mind, the mind finds its punishment." We then see a woman's bare stomach, as we are asked, "What then is the punishment for the worst crime of all?" This is our cue to meet Howard Thorn, whose company — Art Product Inc. makes and distributes bondage loops (the sort of thing that the aforementioned Bettie Page became notorious for starring in). Despite having a perpetually horny, and attractive, wife at home, Howard only gets a sexual kick out of stalking attractive women, breaking into their homes and raping them. Meanwhile, his better half Vicky (who is dubbed by *Dementia 13* star Luana Anders) has become a heroin addict partly due to her husband's lack of interest in her sexual advances. Howard's first victim is an attractive woman who comes to audition for one of his future productions. He chases her through some woodland before finally pinning her down and raping her, allowing our beloved narrator to once

again introduce himself by "helpfully" intoning, "We have seen illusion and reality begin to overlap and fuse."

Perhaps the most amusing sequence comes when we are allowed to see one of the sadomasochistic shorts being shot. "It is magnificent," the film's director tells Howard before we see a hilariously awful clip of a bound man (Hill) being whipped by two mistresses. In what was probably not intended to garner laughs, one of the ladies spits at the man, who then slaps her, only for the other female to whip him across the chest. It plays out like an R-rated version of the Three Stooges and the comedy value is surprisingly high.

Howard commits another rape, and his wife gets increasingly more depressed as her lingerie fails to seduce her husband. With the stalking of women starting to be less and less of a thrill for our protagonist, Howard turns to the newspaper classifieds and answers an advertisement seeking a "tough guy." This leads him to the house of an attractive blonde lady named Carol, whom Howard wastes little time in brutally attacking (our insightful narrator tells us, "The line between illusion and reality has vanished entirely"). However, this victim seeks the help and advice of a friend, who happens to be a karate expert (when we meet her, she is kicking seven shades of hell out of her male opponent).

When Howard returns home, Vicky is going to a fancy dress party. Putting on a mask, her husband decides to drop by the event and spots a masked lady that catches his fancy. Howard corners the woman and begins to attack her but he comes to recognize her as his wife. Retreating to a nearby bar, Howard is taken home by our karate expert. There, she and her friend tie him up and beat him during a night of sadomasochism that our main man most certainly does not appreciate. Meanwhile, back at the party, Vicky meets a Bela Lugosi impersonator and gets wrecked on LSD, after which she begins to fall for her new romancer. "Now that you've seen all of the pleasures of hell, what would you like?" he asks her. "I just want someone to love me," says Vicky as *Mondo Keyhole*—a film that it is impossible to imagine anyone making up—comes to a welcome conclusion.

Although Hill shows some technical innovation in *Mondo Keyhole* (one particular nightmare sequence is suitably hallucinatory and very well-designed), and the LSD trip that invokes the movie's finale is mildly effective, it is difficult to say anything too positive about the director's second full-length feature. While the performances of his non-actors are okay, and the looping isn't all that bad (although the Something Weird Video release, from which this review is taken, comes undone during the final ten minutes and the dialogue fails to work in sync with any character's lips), the picture just isn't very interesting.

One must applaud Hill for not eroticizing the scenes of rape in *Mondo Keyhole*, instead filming them with a frank, unpleasant closeness. But it has to be said that the entire feature feels like a lousy attempt at simply filling the

screen with as many exploitable elements (sex, violence, drugs, sadomasochism, busty women et al.) as possible. Considering such a goal, it is shocking that *Mondo Keyhole* should fall as flat as it does. Nevertheless, with a cast featuring first-time actors who would — with very few exceptions — never be seen again, and a final ten minutes that degenerates into such lunacy it is hard not to take at least some notice, the feature stands out as one of Hill's most bizarre directorial efforts. With a CV that also includes *Spider Baby*, *Ich, ein Groupie* and *Sorceress*, that is something of an achievement — but certainly not a recommendation.

Jack Hill's Memories of *Mondo Keyhole*

After *Spider Baby*, were you worried that, because it hadn't been released right away, you would have a hard time finding more work?

Right after I finished *Spider Baby*, and I realized the picture wasn't going to get released ... that was one of the low points of my life. Then I began talking to the producer John Lamb and he told me that he had a business where he was making 16mm nudist films and marketing them by mail order. You see, in those days you could go to jail for putting bare breasts on the screen and you definitely couldn't show full frontal nudity. But as long as it was seen as a film about naturism, you could do that, you could get away with it. It was crazy. But he was doing his nudist films and I was doing the camerawork and the editing. I had to go out to nudist camps wearing nothing but a belt — if you could visualize that [*laughs*].

So you filmed these movies naked?

Yeah, you couldn't wear clothes.

What about your crew? Did they have to do the full monty as well?

There was no crew, just me. So then John got this idea that he could assemble this full-length movie out of all of these short films that he made and put it into a theatre. I got a Russian recording of the Swan Lake Ballet, and at the time we had no copyright agreement with the Soviet Union, so I put that on a tape and ran it with the movie in the theatre.

That was what became known as *The Raw Ones*, right?

Yeah, we just strung these [loops] all together and then shot a few extra scenes. I edited them all together. I think it was about 80 minutes in length. It was little scenes — a group on a boat in one scene and then we did some sequences in a park. I don't really remember much about it. For me, it was just a job — a way of paying the bills.

Were the nudies still a big success back then?

I guess so. It was the first time any theatre in America had shown full frontal nudity and I remember that we were all sitting in the theatre wonder-

ing if we were going to get busted — if the police were going to come in and raid the place. *The LA Times* refused to advertise it because they thought the title sounded prurient, *The Raw Ones* ... it could have been a Western! But word got around and the theatre was packed anyway.

How much input did you have in *The Raw Ones*?

The Raw Ones was John's baby but I did the camerawork and editing and put it all together.

How did *The Raw Ones* lead to *Mondo Keyhole*?

It was eventually called *Mondo Keyhole*, but the title I originally had for it was *The Worst Crime of All*, meaning rape — rape was "the worst crime of all." At least they'd advertise that in the newspaper! If we had called it *Rape*, then they wouldn't advertise it but *The Worst Crime of All* made it curious. That way people would think, "I wonder ... what's the worst crime of all?" So I shot this picture. John Lamb had certain things that he wanted in it, certain scenes. I used non-actors that looked the part and then I dubbed them with professional actors so they came out looking as if they were pretty good actors. I did the lighting by myself, directed the picture, did the photography and edited it. Actually, I did some pretty tricky things. I had a dream sequence where I did a lot of really clever things— I think that it had some good stuff. John decided that there were these softcore sex movies that were doing really well and he had a partner who was a distributor and he decided he really wanted to do something like this so I did it.

Did you write a script for *Mondo Keyhole*? It looks really disjointed.

I don't think I actually wrote a script but I did put together a story and worked out the scenes. I just kind of made it up as I went along. There were a few scenes that John Lamb wanted to do, but the rest of it was just a story that I worked out myself. I think I wrote down some dialogue. But, yeah, it was all [thrown] together and made up as we [went] along.

Did you have any problems finding actresses who would do some of the things expected of them in the picture? There were sadomasochism elements, rape, nudity...

No, it was really rather soft in terms of nudity — there were no bare breasts in it or anything.

Yeah, although the actresses still had to be naked, even if you didn't show anything.

Oh, we got actors who were used to doing that type of thing [*laughs*]. There was a whole circle of actresses who posed for nudist magazines, nudist movies and that kind of stuff. There was a whole community of people like that. We just tried to have fun with it.

Presumably the rape scenes must have been handled carefully — anything too explicit would have made the movie un-releasable, right?

Yeah, exactly. There was actually a rape scene which they were afraid the distributor might not want in there. They were concerned that it was too hot so I trimmed it down and trimmed it down and the more I trimmed it down, the hotter it got [*laughs*]. So that surprised everybody and was a great lesson in editing for me.

Why did you allow yourself to be tied up and whipped on screen? Was it something you personally enjoyed?

No, at the time I thought it was just a bit of fun but today I am really embarrassed by it.

Did you follow the release of *Mondo Keyhole*?

No. In fact, I don't even know what John did with it. I think they opened it as *Mondo Keyhole* but it totally bombed so they changed the title. I had gone by that time so I didn't really follow it. But movies like that didn't play your regular Hollywood Boulevard theatres. I really don't know whatever became of it.

Presumably the name change was designed to cash in on the success of *Mondo Cane* and *Mondo Topless*.

Well, John Lamb seemed to have a fixation on keyholes for some reason [*laughs*]. He came up with that title and I didn't even hear about it until much later.

What about all the imagery in the movie — the narrator talking over scenes of skulls and clocks and so forth — were you trying to make any sort of point with this?

Oh, I just wanted to try and make it look like a serious movie, you know? But when you are making a sex film, that doesn't really help much [*laughs*]. I was really into Carl Jung's psychology at the time and I was reading a lot of his books. I tried to use some of these things to give the picture a little prestige — at least to make it look serious.

How do you feel about the movie today?

Well, it has got a few clever things in it. A few Jack Hill touches if you will. But otherwise it was just a cheapo junk movie.

How big an influence was David Friedman on *Mondo Keyhole*? The film seems to be very indebted to the "roughie" genre that he innovated.

Yeah, that is right. I knew David Friedman; however, I had not seen any of his movies.

One of the characters in *Mondo Keyhole* reads a newspaper article on him and you focus on this quite diligently.

He was part of that community I was talking about. He was a friend of John Lamb. I didn't know his work, though.

The wife in *Mondo Keyhole* is a heroin addict and this anticipates your use of drugs in your later films [*Coffy*, *Foxy Brown* and *Switchblade Sisters*] as a tool that breaks families and communities apart. Do you agree?

No, I wouldn't say so. It was such a common ingredient in stories in those days. I don't recall why I made her a junkie — but you are always at liberty to make your own readings on such subjects. Like Derrida says, it is the meaning of the actual text that is the issue, not what the author thought he meant by it. I think his observation deserves serious consideration. You can write that I just don't want to own up to it sometimes, or I — myself — don't consciously realize the threads that go through my work other than using certain lines of dialogue more than once because I didn't think anybody would notice.

Did you and John Lamb part amicably after *Mondo Keyhole*?

Yes and no. He really relied on me and when I left — because I had an offer from Roger to do what eventually became *Pit Stop* — he felt betrayed that I had walked out on him. But it didn't seem that way to me. I had done a lot of good things for him for just a salary and now I had the chance to go and make my own movies. He was a little pissed about it but when I spoke to him later, though, he was more understanding.

But John did take your name off the film and credited himself as the director. How did this happen?

He took my name off *Mondo Keyhole* when he changed the title. I think it was because he was angry with me for leaving him. He had no directorial input into the film other than insisting on certain things — a little bondage, a rape scene, etc. — the usual recipe of the time.

Pit Stop (1967)

AKA: *The Winner.* The film was not released until 1969.

Jack Hill: Director-writer-editor

Cast: Brian Donlevy (Grant Willard), Richard Davalos (Rick Bowman), Ellen Burstyn (Ellen McLeod), Sid Haig (Hawk Sidney), Beverly Washburn (Jolene), George Washburn (Ed McLeod), George Barris (George), Titus Moede

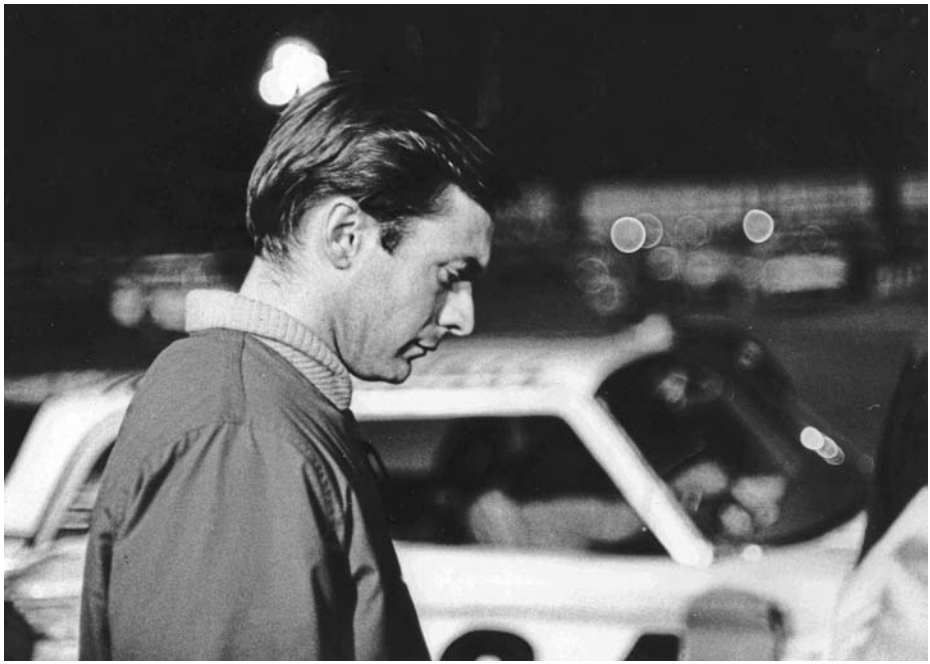
Producers: Lee Strosnider, Roger Corman

Plot: Rick, a young, greasy-haired race car driver, is bailed out of jail by Grant Willard, an opportunistic commentator on the town's weekly figure eight races. Willard has seen Rick race and wants him to be a part of the dangerous races which are currently won with regularity by the arrogant Hawk Sidney. Unable to turn down a challenge, Rick agrees — and after losing two weeks in a row gets some mentoring from the track photographer and goes on to defeat

Sidney, pinching his girlfriend Jolene in the process. With the championships coming up in Phoenix, Rick agrees to be the backup for top driver Ed McLeod (whose wife he later seduces) but, when the big day arrives, Willard indicates to the youngster that a win would mean the big time for him. Rick is left with a choice: keep his word to McLeod or reach for the finish line and double-cross him.

About the film: "I believe that when you're dead, you're dead and that's it"—*Rick Bowman (Richard Davalos*). *Pit Stop* appears to be Jack Hill's most personal film. Certainly, it is the picture where he clearly spells out that financially motivated competition does not bring out the best in people—rather it turns them into monsters. As such, *Pit Stop* can be seen as a metaphor for the Hollywood system that Hill struggled under throughout his career. However, *Pit Stop* can just as easily be interpreted to be about the fierce expectations of succeeding within modern society—where to be the best results in all manner of riches. Thus, the project is really the first feature by Hill in which his token characterization starts to surface—namely, youthful, rebellious, competitive, and fiercely independent personalities put in a situation whereby they begin to expose some kind of fraudulent and/or morally reprehensible hierarchy. As a result, authority is seen to be redundant, it is up to the "little person" to solve the problems exposed in Hill's storylines. Therefore what matters, at least on the "street" level, is guile, smarts and an ability to take fate into your own hands, even when the odds seem dangerous and even insurmountable. One line of dialogue from *Pit Stop* states, "There's a suicide born every minute." The comment relates to the movie's dangerous figure eight racing track but, in the wider picture, it is the very personality—rough, ready and a tad nihilistic—that marks out Hill's most memorable characters. Suffice to say that Rick Bowman, as portrayed by *East of Eden* star Richard Davalos, is one of the director's best. While later Hill works—especially his blaxploitation hits *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*—would expose the seedy underbelly of the supply-and-demand ethic through the figure of a vigilante (Pam Grier), *Pit Stop* is more focused on the journey of a young male to the top of his chosen profession: auto racing. That Hill ultimately creates such an interesting, and layered, piece of work out of such a seemingly uninteresting subject is nothing short of mind-boggling.

In his subsequent, more famous works such as *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown* and *The Swinging Cheerleaders*, money, and those who have plenty of it (or at least let it rule their world), are depicted as corrupt, even authoritarian, individuals. By the time of *Switchblade Sisters*, Hill's young characters have been left a future with garbage strikes, no gun control and high schools being closed down. They belong to the lowest social class and the gap between the rich and poor has widened to such an extent that, in *Switchblade Sisters*, we see one character's mother sleeping with the landlord in order to keep her apartment. Therefore, it is not such a stretch to view *Pit Stop* as Hill's first truly anti-capitalist analogy—the beginning of his exploration of a profit-driven world without morality



Jack Hill directs *Pit Stop* (1967, released in 1969), originally titled *The Winner*.

even when, on the surface, everything appears fine (i.e., the cream will always rise up to the top: *you just have to work harder*). "This is Grant Willard's idea of a vacation. Sell the sponsor's product," bemoans the beautiful Ellen as her husband spends the weekend trying to make some extra cash so that they can begin a family. "This machinery owns us ... body and soul," she concludes. The "machinery" she talks about, of course, relates to their jobs. Perhaps predicting the days of big name sponsorship deals and multi-million dollar salaries in professional sports, Hill also seems to be bemoaning the introduction of money into contests which should, by and large, be played for competitive reasons—rather than for financial gain. Today the two are seen as bedfellows but in *Pit Stop* they do not seem comfortable together. Rather, money turns things ugly and Grant Willard finally appears as little more than a pimp, cruising from an older driver to a promising new youngster—the proverbial "stud"—with no regard for ethics or humanity.

For all intents and purposes the racing track in *Pit Stop* represents the wider world: Its financial riches (at least for the winner)—and the initial prestige afforded to him—consume young Rick Bowman to such an extent that he can think about nothing else—and, ultimately, he becomes frigid. "What is wrong with you?" asks his girlfriend Jolene when Rick is unable to make love to her the night before he drives in the championship tournament. On the same

evening, top racer Ed McLeod is equally unable to get it up for his wife, the beautiful Ellen (played by a young Ellen Burstyn, here credited as Ellen McRae). For both Ed and Rick, their dreams are wrapped up in the race track — and the benefits that come with a win. "Isn't that why you latched onto me in the first place? So you could have a winner?" Rick barks at Jolene. For him, beating everyone else promises fame, fortune and beautiful women — the very things that capitalism shows us every day by way of the "successful" celebrities who have "made it" and who we are expected to be in awe of as they walk red carpets, attend exclusive parties, live in secluded mansions, date glamorous partners, etc.

For Hill, the desire for this lifestyle — represented through Rick — is vulgar and his dialogue spells this out to us. For example, Brian Donlevy's Grant Willard prefigures his commentary on one contest by stating:

> I'm trying to find myself a winner. Racing is a tough business. Strictly the survival of the fittest. Just like war. You got a winner and you got a loser and nothing in between. I busted a lot of heads training my company in the Marines, but when they went into action they led the whole division in decorations received. What was left of them.

The analogy between war and figure eight racing becomes clearer when Rick rams the edge of Ed's car on a turn, causing him to go into a spin and end up in a crash. The "accident" causes Ed's death but, in effect, secures Rick's position at the top because he suddenly finds himself unrivalled in gaining the full attention and sponsorship of Willard. However, Willard's desire for a "winner" at any cost not only results in the death of a human being but turns Rick from likable street urchin to coldhearted thug — unrepentant at his deeds because, at the end of the day, Ed's death allows him to take a further step up the ladder to success. In other words, Rick has had a golden carrot dangled in front of him and, just as Willard's Marines were "decorated" for their service (i.e., even when at war, colleagues are at competition with one another), the youthful racer is also recognized as the best in his sport when *Pit Stop* comes to an end. But it is at a price. When Hill's movie concludes, Rick is alone. No longer the popular, hard-grafting youth of the after-show figure eight parties (again, perhaps another dig at the oft-ludicrous back-patting celebrations which are part and parcel of Hollywood), Rick is cold, cynical and far more "lived in" than when we first met him. Hill's message cannot be clearer: Success creates loneliness. When Rick walks out of the hospital ward where Ed has died, he leaves behind his colleagues; he is now on his way to bigger, maybe better, things and those he considers beneath him (such as fallen racer Hawk Sidney — still Sid Haig's career highlight) are not invited along for the journey. It is a customary Hollywood story, wherein old friends are quickly discarded in favor of more glamourous hang-outs and hangers-on.

It is also interesting to note that when we see Rick, in full employee mode, slaving away in the wrecking yard (where he earns, as the script puts it, "some

honest money"), he wears white work garments. However, come the races he is dressed head to foot in black — again hinting at his gradual transformation from a (literally) white collar worker to something altogether darker. Not that the death of Ed is intentional on Rick's part — but his double-cross of a supposed friend is enough to make us understand that his sole care is in looking out for himself. When Ed's death is announced, Rick offers no apology to his wife (whom he has had an affair with), and shows no signs of grief; rather, he follows Willard out to his car and drives to another town to compete in another race to continue pursuing his American dream.

For many newcomers to *Pit Stop*, perhaps the most interesting draw will be that of a young Ellen Burstyn, who went on to win the Best Supporting Actress Oscar for 1971's *The Last Picture Show*. While it would be remarkably silly to compare her performance in Hill's movie, in which she is given little more than an extended cameo, to her more central role in the Peter Bogdanovich picture, it should be noted that she is lit and shot as remarkably in *Pit Stop* as in any of her subsequent features. Indeed, as an introduction to the big screen, Burstyn is presented as a beautiful, feminine "girl next door" type — and in the few sequences she is in, she genuinely warms up the screen. It is also refreshing to see Hill, even at this early stage of his filmmaking career, begin to subvert audience expectations of women. Fittingly, then, when we first meet Burstyn she is working as a car mechanics, clad in a welder's mask and long white overalls. The sight of her — as she takes off her cover to reveal her breathtaking features — is unforgettable.

Mention should also be made of Brian Donlevy who, in his last role, looks distant enough to suggest that he cannot wait for his paycheck to clear. But the old pro gives Willard just the right amount of world-weariness and selfish disregard for others that the character needs. Leading man Richard Davalos is perfectly cast as Rick, his obvious good looks and natural onscreen presence imbuing his celluloid personality with just the right amount of ego and edginess. Although he would not go on to be a major star, he gained some immortality as the cover boy for The Smiths' final album *Strangeways Here We Come*. As his girlfriend, *Spider Baby*'s Beverly Washburn is a revelation, giving a more mature performance than the one she gave in Hill's horror opus. The actress has a tomboyish charm but her eventual realization that she is involved with the wrong guy gives *Pit Stop* a brief, but welcome, female perspective. Sid Haig, a Hill regular after his delirious turn in *Spider Baby*, is given a far meatier, and more demanding role, in *Pit Stop* and he positively eats up the screen. Here, Haig begins the film as the lout we love to hate, a cocky, self-assured asshole who is given such tough lines as "I got a good piece of advice for ya — stay out of my way and you'll be all right." His character, ominously given the comic book moniker of Hawk Sidney, is set-up so that his trouncing at the hands of Rick will be cathartic and allow the audience to embrace his "heroic" defeat. Of course, the exact opposite happens. After his win, we see Rick, the supposed

victor, drunk-driving with Hawk's girlfriend. Then a similarly intoxicated Hawk finds the luckless racer and trashes his car with an axe — also beating his rival with the handle and breaking his arm. This sequence, achieved with a succession of close-ups, fast edits and forced camera angles, is a delirious how-to for any low-budget director wanting to whip up a frenzy onscreen. Here, at least, Hawk lives up to his name — a predatory individual, totally focused on destroying his victim.

That said, Hill soon shows us another side of Hawk. When Rick wins yet another figure eight race, Hawk, in apparent disillusionment, musters up what little humility he has left and bravely spits out, "You rode a hell of a race, Rick" before offering an apology and asking if he can buy him a beer. In this moment, our attitude towards Hawk changes — and we also start to grow colder on Rick as he plots with Willard to race in Phoenix as Ed's back-up driver. Later, when he opts to fumble with Ed's wife in the desert, it becomes obvious that Rick obeys no rules but his own — he lives for the moment with one eye on the future. Of all of Hill's "rebel" characters (usually female like Pam Grier or, in *Switchblade Sisters*, Joanne Nail), Rick is the most believable, perhaps because — for once — Hill has the chance to create a lead character who is male. Considering that the director's next film (*Ich, ein Groupie*) would represent the start of Hill's creation of overwhelmingly female-led pictures, *Pit Stop* seems unique in the director's oeuvre.

The key line of Rick's transformation from ambitious race car driver is when he talks to his girlfriend, Jolene, about Ed: "He's a big wheel. I hate people who think they're big wheels." Here we also see ourselves — who hasn't wanted to "teach someone a lesson"? But with Rick, this seems more like paranoid aggression — careerism disguised as a personal grudge. Ed's entire "wrongdoing" is being more experienced than Rick and, thus, being a rung above him on the ladder of success. Never does Ed give the impression of being a "big wheel"; rather, he plans for early retirement to start a new life, and a family, with his (unfaithful) wife. If *Pit Stop* has one fault, it is that we do not get to know Ed quite as well as we might like to. But one can understand why this is; after all, Hill's movies are invariably told through the eyes of one central person and here it is Rick. Admirably, the director is able to take a nonchalant position in this — he remains ambiguous, taking a distant, almost documentary-like approach to the action as it unfolds. Rick's journey is never judged for us; we are left to question our own feelings towards him.

Not only was *Pit Stop* produced and distributed by an uncredited Roger Corman but it introduced Hill to Jane Schaffer a young producer who was also uncredited on the film. Schaffer would go on to be something of a muse for the director — not only dating him but producing Hill's three subsequent pictures *Ich ein Groupie*, *The Big Doll House* and *The Big Bird Cage*. Asked about her memories of *Pit Stop*, Schaffer says,

> It was during the pre-production of *Pit Stop* that I first met Jack. In fact, my neighbor at that time, Bart Patton, who worked a lot for Corman, was production manager and asked if I was interested in being a PA. I was but I had no background in movies at all. This formed one significant part of my connection with Jack over the next six years: He was the professional and I learned from him. He was my education in filmmaking, along with Roger Corman. Why I have no credit on *Pit Stop* I have no idea ... but I did get to appear as an extra which thrilled me, and got me my first taste of the effort and resources that go into making even the most trivial of movies. I should mention, however, that Jack never approached any of his work as trivial — he relished adventure, sex, travel, action, humor, characters, atmosphere, and he worked hard to bring these to the screen. On the other hand, he hated pomposity — and this was in the day of the auteur.

It is perhaps Hill's hatred of pomposity that allows him to create a character as believable as Rick Bowman — a personality who can easily be seen as representative of a Hollywood ego. His rise from the small time to the big time, and the gradual loss of his humanity that comes with this, is all too reflective of the Hollywood system that can turn paupers into millionaires and which fills up the pages of gossip columns and magazines every day as the latest "train wreck" celebrity falls from grace.

Pit Stop remains a relative obscurity, which is a great shame. Plot aside, Hill gets some great racing footage and ties in stock film with on-the-spot action just perfectly. No doubt the final product threw the marketers a curveball because the movie does not really fit into any sort of easily categorized genre — and the sleazy "flesh against steel" tagline suggests that somebody went to great lengths to find an exploitable element in the picture. However, for the work of a director most associated with violent, grungy grindhouse flicks, *Pit Stop* is a must-see. It is a tantalizing glimpse of "what could have been" had the movie taken off or been shot in color, thus securing a wider release. Instead, the film was yet another commercial stiff for Hill, leading him down the path of women in prison and busty African-American vigilantes. See *Pit Stop* to really understand what makes Jack Hill, and his storytelling abilities, great.

Jack Hill's Memories of *Pit Stop*

How did you go from *Mondo Keyhole*, one of your career lows, to *Pit Stop*?

I screened *Mondo Keyhole* for Roger and told him how much I had made it for and he said, "Jack if you can do that, there is money to be made."

Why is Roger Corman's name not on *Pit Stop*?

Because it was totally my thing — I got together my own group and we all worked for a percentage of the film, so he was basically just financing it. But considering that so many people worked for shares instead of cash, he wasn't even doing that...

Did Roger have any input to the nature of the film?

Yes, he said, "I want you to do a stock car racing movie" — because there

was a certain market for that at the time — and I said, "I want to do an art film." He replied, "Okay, then do an art film about stock car racing." That was my idea — I said, "Great, then I'll do an art film about stock car racing." I came back to him after writing the script and I said, "I am going to make the first stock car racing film where the hero loses the big race." He said, "No, Jack, the hero has to win the big race." So I made him win the big race but lose his soul.

Why figure eight racing?

I don't remember how I heard about figure eight racing but I discovered it and went down to watch it. I was so impressed that I got the idea that this is where I wanted to set the picture — with this kind of action. So I wrote the script to use it.

Was figure eight popular back then?

Oh yeah, it was really popular. What you see in the film is real races.

Do you still see it in California?

I thought it didn't exist anymore but a while ago I heard from some producers who wanted to do a remake of *Pit Stop* and they said it did. They were a bit nervous about the rights to the script so they dropped the idea.

Did people get hurt in the figure eight races?

People did get hurt but not as often as you'd think. It was dangerous for me because we had five cameras on the races at the weekend and I took the cameras near the intersections because I didn't have insurance for anybody and I didn't want to see anyone get hurt. That was the dangerous spot but I didn't worry about [*laughs*].

Did you have any problems with the races?

For the major climactic race scene, we were going to shoot a race scheduled in Riverside, California, and we were halfway through our shooting schedule when it got cancelled. I was just freaking out, wondering what to do, because I worked with a lot of other people who had shares in the movie. If I tried to spend more money, then we would all have lost our share. So there was a racetrack in LA called Whiteman's Stadium, which had stockcar races once in a while, so I actually got somebody to promote a race. I actually promised the guy he wouldn't lose money on it, which of course I never even knew, and he put on a race, which we filmed, and he actually broke even with it so we were all happy. I cannot believe today that we did that [*laughs*].

Why did the title change from *The Winner* to *Pit Stop*?

The Winner was my title but Roger didn't like it. The reason was that there was a big racing picture coming out from Universal at the time called *Winning* and Roger thought that it might cause confusion.

How did your "star name" Brian Donlevy get involved?

Mainly because he was available to us. In this particular case I cannot remember how his name came up. I just thought that he was the sort of actor Roger liked to get — someone who was a little over the hill but who gives you a little bit of prestige. So you write the script in such a way that all of his scenes can be done in three days for just $3000 and paid him under the table because he was in tax trouble.

Did you have freedom in the casting? Is that why Beverly Washburn and Sid Haig are back from *Spider Baby*?

Yeah, I got total freedom. It was great to have Beverly and Sid back and I wrote the parts for them. Roger left me totally alone.

The transformation of the character played by Richard Davalos throws the audience a curve, doesn't it? We start off liking him but we grow cold to him as his character becomes more and more immoral.

Exactly. I like to turn over an audience, you know — to lead them to believe that somebody is a certain way and then make them realize they were wrong. I think it is a pretty good accomplishment to do that. Richard did very well. He came from the same school of acting as James Dean, he was part of that group. He gave his character a really dark personality and that was good for the film.

How did you first meet him?

He had interviewed for me on *Spider Baby* — my production manager Bart Patton happened to know him because they were neighbors. He really wanted to do it but I felt that he was wrong for the part and he was the first one to agree after he saw what Quinn Redeker had done with it. However, I liked him — I thought that he was a very good actor. So when I did *Pit Stop*, I kept him in mind and offered him the role.

One of your big discoveries was Ellen Burstyn. How did this come about?

After I did *Spider Baby*, I realized that I had to learn more about acting. When I did *Spider Baby* I was just totally lucky because I got actors who just played off each other. I didn't need to give them much direction at all, I just let them go and they were perfect, but I realized that I needed to know more so I went into an acting class and I spent a year there while I was still working with John Lamb doing other things. So when I got the call to do *Pit Stop*, I called my acting tutor and asked him if he could recommend somebody and he sent over Ellen Burstyn who had only done some TV, and I thought she was perfect for it and she wanted to do it. The first invited screening of the movie I asked Peter Bogdanovich to come and that is when he first saw her — so he cast her in *The Last Picture Show*. However, despite the fact I invited him to my screening, he didn't invite me to his screening for *The Last Picture Show* — but he's a jerk anyway.

You shoot her very well. It is easy to see why she went on to be such a star.

I personally did the lighting on her to make her look glamourous. I had studied photo portraiture with a master and put my knowledge to good use. I shot her very "old Hollywood" style and I was glad that the director of photography allowed me to do so.

***Pit Stop* is a real oddity in your oeuvre as well.**

Yeah, it's my art film [*laughs*].

What was the budget?

About $75,000

Even back then, that wasn't a huge amount.

We planned to do it for much less but we got so excited about what we were doing that we wanted to do more with it.

***Pit Stop* wasn't a big success when it came out. Why do you think this was?**

Well, when the picture was finished, all of the drive-ins had changed their policy and gone color and they wouldn't take a black-and-white picture unless it was the second feature. So Roger put it on the shelf for two years [note: *Pit Stop* is copyrighted as 1967, the year of its production] until he could produce a biker movie, a motorcycle film, which he called *Naked Angels*. We produced a lot of *Angels* movies—*Angels Hard as They Come* was another, and I forget the others. I did the ad campaigns for most of them, though. So he produced this movie, and I wrote the advertising tagline which became famous—it was quoted in *Time* magazine as being a particularly outrageous example of this genre of advertising. It was, "Mad Dogs from Hell, Hunting Down Their Prey With a Quarter Ton of Hot Steel Throbbing Between Their Legs."

That is genius.

Yeah. And they were playing it on the radio spots and people were making jokes out of it. That became more famous than any of my movies [*laughs*]. That was the Jack Hill touch. So then we released them as a double bill and I even have photographs of the lobby in San Francisco where it played and my film was on the left of the card and the audience was clearly there to see *Pit Stop*, they had obviously heard about it. So Roger actually did very well with it. But I never got a quarter out of it because if a picture is released as a second feature, then it doesn't get any money, it gets a [flat] rental of 25 bucks a week, which never began to pay for it. So that was his way of screwing me and my group out of everything.

I see *Pit Stop* as your first anti-capitalist film, in that the more Rick is seduced by fame and riches, the more he begins to lose his soul.

Well, yeah, on the whole, I think that is very perceptive and, more importantly, a very interesting reading. My only comment is that I don't think money is all that much of a consideration to Rick and his peers; it is more the ego trip

and the other less tangible rewards of beating the competition — which I think is just as present in business and, especially, the film business. But that's just my humble opinion.

And the parties that take place following the races also indicate a certain cynicism towards the back-patting of the film industry.

Right. I went to one, once, so I know what you mean.

Did *Pit Stop* lead to the opportunity to do anything bigger?

After I did *Pit Stop*, and before it was released, I showed it around as a sample of my work and Universal ... at that time there was a big motorcycle movie with Jack Nicholson...

***Easy Rider*?**

Yeah, *Easy Rider*— and everybody was looking for the next hot young guy that could appeal to the kids. So I showed the picture there and Universal signed me up to a contract, and they had a program to get young talent in. I had a six-month contract — I had an office with my name on the door and yet nobody would give me any guidance. They just always told me to "come up with something." So I came up with something but nobody would ever talk to me. It was during this time that the thing with Karloff came up so I took a leave with my contract to go and do that...

3

The Boris Karloff Films

Dance of Death (1968)

AKA: *House of Evil*; *Macabre Serenade* (original Mexican title)

Jack Hill: Co-director (with Juan Ibáñez)/co-writer (with Luis Enrique Vergara)

Cast: Boris Karloff (Matthias Morteval), Julissa (Lucy Durant), Andrés García (Charles Beasley), José Ángel Espinosa (Dr. Emery Horvath), Beatriz Baz (Cordelia Rash), Quintin Bulnes (Ivar Morteval), Manuel Alvarado (Morgenstern Morteval), Arturo Fernández (Fodor)

Producers: Juan Ibáñez, Luis Enrique Vergara

Plot: The year is 1900 and Matthias Morteval is a crotchety old recluse who lives in a large countryside manor, attended to by his doctor during his final days on earth. He calls all of his known relatives to his hideaway so that he can pick an heir to his fortune, which has been built from the sales of toys to "kings and maharajahs" who have "paid fabulous prices for them." However, Matthias also has a sinister secret to reveal: The madcap genes of his dead brother Hugo may be dominant throughout the entire family's bloodline. After disclosing this, Matthias suffers what appears to be a deadly heart attack, leaving his visitors to explore their new surroundings by themselves. As the night of terror progresses, each individual begins to roam the vast manor only to die under mysterious circumstances.

About the film: "I don't trust anybody. Sorry, it's nothing personal, you understand"—Cordelia (*Beatriz Baz*), *moments before she separates from one of the few still-living characters and gets herself killed*. By the time that Jack Hill was offered a four-picture deal by Mexican producers Juan Ibáñez and Luis Enrique Vergara, it is safe to assume that the up-and-coming director was becoming increasingly frustrated with his chosen career. After all, *Spider Baby* had gone unreleased, *Blood Bath* had been shelved and then turned into *Track of the Vampire* and *Mondo Keyhole* had sunk without a trace. Meanwhile, the fate of his recently completed, and highly accomplished, *Pit Stop* was still unsure. In light of this, it is easy to understand why Hill took on the Herculean

task of helming a quartet of back-to-back horror films in two countries and with only four weeks of shooting with star Boris Karloff. For a start, the deal offered him the opportunity to film in color for the very first time. Secondly, although still very low-budget, the resulting pictures all look far more extravagant when compared to the skid row production values of *Spider Baby*, *Pit Stop* and, especially, *Mondo Keyhole*. Then, of course, there was the legendary Boris Karloff himself — in the twilight of his career, certainly, but still obtaining work in projects of such high quality as Mario Bava's classic *Black Sabbath* (1963) and Peter Bogdanovich's masterwork *Targets* (1968). In other words, this wasn't Bela Lugosi struggling for work and ending up in *Glen or Glenda* (1953) — this was a star actor, who still possessed some name value and who wanted to continue to perform in worthy pictures.

Unfortunately for Karloff, *Dance of Death* is a horror movie that has very little going for it and which represents the start of a doomed relationship between the actor, Hill and producer-eventual co-director Ibáñez. Of course, Hill never did get to finish the four films that he was hired to begin in California and to complete in Mexico and, to be fair, each outing went into production under horribly strained circumstances. Furthermore, although it is depressing to discover that such a great acting career came to an end with such terrible projects, Karloff at least retains his integrity with a series of typically committed performances. However, taken as a whole and without any of this background knowledge, *Dance of Death* is a real chore to sit through — and only the fiery, *Fall of the House of Usher*–inspired ending, as well as the odd moment of evocative gothic atmosphere, enlivens the tedious movie. This said, *Dance of Death* doesn't look quite as schizophrenic as it should. Certainly, the opening sequence — wherein young Lucy and her fiancé Charles approach Moorhenge Manor and meet Karloff's sinister Matthias — shows some early promise. Moreover, the period setting is certainly believable and the vivid colors, costumes and set dressing add to the historic feel of the feature. So far so good then, at least until Karloff makes an early exit from the picture and everything seems to go very, very wrong. Indeed, as one critic has pointed out, "Karloff only appears briefly to set up the story and at the end of the picture to provide the climax, while the rest of the movie meanders along with the Mexican cast residing in an old castle awaiting their inheritance [and] being eliminated by toy automations."[1]

After a brief — and needless — prologue in which a girl's dead body is discovered by two men, with her eyes removed ("Just like the other girl down at the lake," intones one of her finders), *Dance of Death* gets underway. Resembling a "murder mystery weekend" captured on celluloid, the film's flimsy plot holes up a few uninteresting characters in a mansion and then gradually has them get lost and killed. The hint that something supernatural may be happening comes early on when Matthias intones that the creators of the various toys littered around the manor "had the ability to make them evil."

Exactly how they did this, or why they would want to create homicidal dolls in the first place, is never explained. Then, when another dead body is discovered outside the mansion, Charles—who has not been invited and who is treated with suspicion because he does not share a bloodline with Matthias—is instantly blamed and locked away in a cell. Bizarrely, the man takes his incarceration well, with a sprightly "very well then" as he is led away to the on-site prison. As the night continues, *Dance of Death* has its bland personalities stroll through the old house, separate from one another and then die—only with no scares, and certainly no tension, on offer. Although the movie manages to keep the whodunit plot consistent throughout, the idea of haunted toys isn't used to any kind of frightening effect and it is difficult to care about who is controlling them. Instead, the consistent "squeaking" noise that the various toy soldiers and other such playthings make as they come alive and move is almost instantly grating and is likely only to encourage the use of the fast-forward button. This high-pitched racket is supposed to indicate the presence of something evil but instead becomes painful to listen to, which one presumes was not the desired effect. When the dolls do get nasty, as seen when Charles is followed by four murderous life-size toy soldiers, they don't seem very threatening and unintentional hilarity comes when the actor has to actually "corner" himself so that his slow-moving antagonists have a chance of maiming him. Then, after he is stabbed through the arm, the actor takes a stand and simply pushes the psychotic soldiers over—instantly knocking his aggressors dead—before charging out of the room. Clearly, when the movie's villains are this feeble, there is very little to be scared about—and when the film attempts to make the dolls appear threatening, it is so overdone as to be laughable. For instance, when some of the visitors are introduced to a roomful of "deadly" toys, the objects are presented through quick edits, handheld camera shots and sweeping closeups, with the aforementioned "squeaking" noise swamping the soundtrack. Meanwhile, the film's actors begin to simulate revulsion and hysteria—as if the very glimpse of some wooden models and toy knights is enough to set off a panic attack. Inevitably, the result is plain hokey—and the overdone camerawork, and accompanying sound effects, do nothing to make a dancing sheik or a giggling jester puppet appear scary. Other set pieces, which have the potential to be slightly more macabre, are set up so far in advance that the shock is completely diluted. This is perhaps best evidenced when one character bends over and stares straight into a toy cannon with the inevitable outcome being that he is shot in the face.

The sad thing is that there is some potential, in amongst all of the silliness and tedium, for *Dance of Death* to be an atmospheric and chilling little potboiler—especially since the interiors of the mansion are so beautifully constructed and provoke the needed *House of Usher* feeling. Perhaps the saddest thing is that the movie's closing moments at least live up to the Victorian promise with which the film begins (complete with a beautiful matte painting of

Moorhenge Manor that is used for the introductory wide shots). Indeed, one critic has even gone so far as to deem Karloff's closing moments, playing an organ while his luxurious home burns down, as "the last great gothic moment of his career."[2] It also gives the actor a chance to briefly play one of the few "classic" horror roles that eluded him: The Phantom of the Opera.

For some Karloff buffs, this heated conclusion may warrant watching the boredom that precedes it — and it is admittedly quite bittersweet to see the grand old man of horror cheerfully bashing out one final tune as his manor crumbles around him in flames (this is easily the movie's most extravagant special effect as well). Yet, because the actor has been used only fleetingly in the film he carries no air of menace whatsoever.* "Oh, forgive me, Cousin Lucy ... you are evil, but the fire will purify your immortal soul," howls Karloff as he and his only surviving family member perish in the flames that surround them. Admittedly, it is a surprise to find out that no one is going to make it out of the movie alive (at least that seems to be the case — thanks to the very sudden ending).

Nevertheless, this belated shock comes at the very end of *Dance of Death*'s paltry running time (72 minutes, 34 seconds) and reaching the final credits feels more like having passed an endurance test than anything else. The poster quote for this turkey states that "Boris Karloff saved the last dance for you." To be honest, you'll wish that he hadn't bothered.

Isle of the Snake People (1968)

AKA: *Cult of the Damned*; *Snake People*; *Isle of the Living Dead*

Jack Hill: Co-director (with Juan Ibáñez)/co-writer (with Juan Ibáñez and Luis Enrique Vergara)

Cast: Boris Karloff (Carl van Molder), Julissa (Anabella Vandenberg), Carlos East (Lt. Andrew Wilhelm), Rafael Bertrand (Capt. Pierre Labesch), Yolanda Montes (Kalea), Quintin Bulnes (Klinsor), Santanón (Dwarf), Julia Marichal (Mary Ann Vanderberg), Yol Duhalt (Mingo), Martinique (Maria)

Producers: Juan Ibáñez, Luis Enrique Vergara

Plot: Anabella arrives on a remote Mexican island to meet with her wealthy uncle, who has purchased over half of the area. Nearby, a group of voodoo practitioners, let by a steely-eyed belly dancer called Kalea, are raising the dead in order to enslave them. It is also rumored that they are practicing cannibalism. A local police captain, Pierre Labesch, wants to infiltrate this cult and bring the horrors to an end, but he is told that the followers are under the spell of the mysterious "Damballah." No one will reveal who Damballah is, so — with

**Despite his headline billing in* Dance of Death *and his other Hill-Ibáñez pictures, he barely even merits a cameo credit; it is difficult to accept the kind, eccentric old man from the opening scenes as a mastermind of malevolence who actually wants to end all traces of his family's bloodline.*

the help of his young lieutenant — Labesch begins planning a raid on the night of an uncoming human sacrifice.

About the film: "To me the law is a simple matter: There is right and there is wrong"—*Capt. Pierre Labesch* (*Rafael Bertrand*). *Isle of the Snake People* is oddly titled because serpents play only a minimal part in the story. Admittedly, it is an unforgettable name for a low-budget horror opus but it is also extremely misleading because the only snake on offer is the python that Kalea carries over her shoulder when she is doing her belly dance routine prior to one of the movie's ridiculous voodoo sermons. It is also worth noting that the creature bites into a supporting actor's arm during one scene, which looks suitably painful. Other than that, however, the sole unique use of the title reptile is when the same python is used to "tie" Anabella, and her identical twin, together in an incestuous kiss during a bizarre dream sequence. Indeed, far from being "snake people," the villagers seem to be just your average, run-of-the-mill, Hollywood black magic practitioners—complete with voodoo dolls, raging fires, animals for sacrifice and white shawls. Nothing original, in other words, and certainly nothing to get excited over. But *Isle of the Snake People* is a more enjoyable romp than *Dance of Death* and it is occasionally enlivened by some surreal atmospherics. This is not to say that it is a good movie—far from it—but in the dire company of *Dance of Death* and *Incredible Invasion*, it at least scores points for being endurable.

The story begins with a prologue in which a dwarf, clad in an oversized top hat, leads a man to the grave of a recently buried woman. The pint-sized magician then begins a one-man voodoo ceremony in which a chicken's head is cut off (for real) and the blood from its body is drained across an unearthed casket, leading to the sudden reanimation of the dead lady. Makes not one bit of sense, of course, but there you go—at least *Isle of the Snake People* begins with some promise of action and horror. Moreover, the much-revisited studio set that is used for this sequence is certainly impressive (flashes of lightning, cobwebs, skeletons, rickety old tree branches popping into frame and evocative blue hues). Although it's still low-budget, one has to admire the thought that has gone into such a set-up and it is understandable why this location is used as much as possible during the film's running time. (The same set also appears in the later Hill-Ibáñez offering *Fear Chamber*.)

After a credits sequence that highlights Karloff's face (misleading the viewer into assuming the great actor will actually be at the forefront of the film's action), we meet Anabella (played by Julissa, who has the dubious honor of appearing in three of the four Hill-Ibáñez features). The strangest part of this young woman's characterization comes when we learn that she is from the "international anti-saloon league," a group dedicated to stopping the sale of liquor because "modern science has shown that alcohol is responsible for 99.2 percent of the world's sins." While this "fact" in itself is obviously very silly, the reason for giving Anabella these traits is pointless because nothing is done

with them (perhaps indicating the problem of having one director start a film and another take it over). Sure, we learn that she hates booze but no one tries to get her drunk, she doesn't accidentally drink some spirits and end up intoxicated, and she doesn't even have to battle her way through a saloon full of pissed-up male admirers ... no, absolutely *nothing* happens to warrant her personal stance against alcohol being used as a plot point. The other strange thing about Anabella is that she has a dream that makes not one iota of sense. Although this is the film's highlight (it uses a studio-built underground cave that has a gothic feel to it which might even make Mario Bava proud), it is most memorable because it seems to indicate that the heroine harbors lesbian desires. Again, this comes out of nowhere and doesn't resolve itself in any way, shape or form. We see Anabella emerge from a coffin, clad in a nightgown, and proceed to kiss her doppelganger. Then she puts the head of a *live snake* into her mouth (and this was before a similar scene in 1973's iconic porn classic *The Devil in Miss Jones*). Why does she do this? Who knows? But this is *Isle of the Snake People* all over — a feature that seems to have been made up as the filming went along and flitted between two different filmmakers.

There is also a faint racism about the proceedings — although this could well be down to either clumsy dialogue or a completely intentional attempt at addressing bigotry in a selection of the film's characters. "Sometimes even I get frightened by these people's eyes," exclaims one lawman in a reference to the black natives that he passes on the back of a van. Although there is every chance that this comment is meant to be aimed towards the locals who are practicing voodoo (which also includes Caucasians), it is, unfortunately, said when there are only those of an ethnic minority present onscreen and, as such, it leaves a nasty taste in the mouth. It is also disparaging to hear voodoo priestess Kalea bemoan a mixed race relationship between two of her followers with the remark, "You know that Damballah does not like this kind of thing." Again, she *could* be indicating the partnership between a believer and a peasant girl — rather than a white man and a black girl — but it is ambiguous enough to warrant being mentioned.

However, in amongst these comments, *Isle of the Snake People* makes some distinctly unsubtle attempts at social commentary, with the wealthy white islanders resurrecting the dead black villagers to become their "slaves" in the sugar fields. There is even a sequence where one "master" begins to sexually advance upon his female servant — which, of course, also hints at necrophilia — but carries an obvious disdain towards white "ownership." Finally, the island's law enforcement announces a curfew and a nightly military patrol — effectively creating a police state, something that was quite topical in Latin America at the time. "You don't stop violence with violence," states the film's hero, and voice of conscience, Lieutenant Wilhelm, who adds, "Interfering with these people's religion is playing with fire." Of course, this comment is as relevant today as it ever was, making *Isle of the Snake People* all the more confusing

because, as noble as it is to see a movie addressing political problems, very little is done with these themes outside of the occasional, flippant piece of dialogue.

Consequently, it is disappointing to report that — despite lesbianism, brief sadomasochism, hints of necrophilia and several belly dancing sequences — the feature frequently drags. While it is understandable that the producers would want to make the most of the Karloff scenes, the truth is that they are the least compelling parts of the entire film. Introduced 21 minutes into the picture, the poor old man is given some depressingly awful dialogue to murmur — including a confusing, nonsensical rant where he states that he is working on "a vast untouched power that has laid dormant for thousands of years" and which will result in "no more wars, hunger, famine or disease." In order to prove this, he stares intently at a mirror for several seconds before managing to make it move an inch or so ... an impressive party trick but hardly something that is going to result in global peace. When Karloff (or rather his double — the final scenes were no doubt among those shot in Mexico without him) is revealed to be Damballah, his "vast untouched power" involves conjuring in "the age of the Baron Samedi." Unless you were paying close attention to the opening narration, chances are that you will no idea what Karloff is talking about. The introductory voiceover briefly mentions that Samedi is "supposed to be able to revive the dead." Exactly how this stops "war, famine, hunger and disease" is anyone's guess.

Ultimately, *Isle of the Snake People* is a bewildering viewing experience. Characters are introduced for no apparent reason. For instance, the dwarf who we meet at the beginning of the film — and whom we are led to believe will be pivotal to the plot — doesn't do anything except run around and grimace at the camera during the various voodoo ceremonies. Likewise, it is never explained why the police captain has waited so long to don a shawl and go undercover at one of the native sermons or why, when he decides to do so, he doesn't realize that he will be noticed seeing as how the ceremonies only seem to attract five or six devotees. Yet, because absolutely nothing in the film gels or comes to a sensible resolution, the overall effect is maddening enough to keep you watching — which is quite a feat considering that long stretches go by with very little happening outside of the expected bad acting, comparable dialogue and breaks for star Yolanda Montes to do a belly dance.

It might be tempting to draw some ironic parallels between the obvious use of a badly matched body double (played by an obscure actor called Jerry Petty) in some of Karloff's scenes and the similar circumstances that befell Bela Lugosi a decade earlier in *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959) wherein the Hungarian icon was replaced, after his death, by an ill-suited stand-in. Perversely, however, *Isle of the Snake People* is a little too technically competent to match up to the hilarious disaster of Ed Wood's legendary sci-fi schlock-fest — although it does rival the Lugosi fiasco at the very end. Thus, just as you think Karloff

has managed to make it through to the finale of the movie without having his legacy hampered too much, someone dubs in his final lines and, suffice to say, it might just be the worst impersonation of a British accent ever conducted to celluloid. Nevertheless, *Isle of the Snake People* has its share of kitsch appeal. Although it is a bad movie, it is also sporadically entertaining; which is perhaps about as much as anyone can wish for from the dubious Hill-Ibáñez partnership.

Incredible Invasion (1968)

AKA: *Alien Terror*; *Invasion Siniestra* (original Mexican title); *Sinister Invasion*

Jack Hill: Co-director (with Juan Ibáñez and José Luis González de León)

Cast: Boris Karloff (Prof. John Mayer), Enrique Guzman (Dr. Paul Rosten), Christa Linder (Laura), Maura Monti (Dr. Isabel Reed), Yerye Beirute (Thomas), Tere Valez (Nancy), Sergio Kleiner (Spaceman), Mariela Flores (Victim by Lake), Tito Novaro (General Nord), Nathanael Leon (Villager), Julian de Meriche (Visiting Dignitary)

Producers: Juan Ibáñez, Luis Enrique Vergara

Plot: In 1890 Gudenberg, Prof. John Mayer is experimenting with sending nuclear rays into outer space. One evening such a ray hits a passing spaceship, whose pilot lands on Earth with the intention of stopping this from happening again. In order to do this, he possesses the mind of a local serial killer called Thomas, who is committing a series of Jack the Ripper–style murders on women of the night. The alien orders him to infiltrate the professor's laboratory and destroy the ray machine. Thomas does this without any problems—even managing to take over the professor's mind, although the old man's sudden change of moods causes worry in his niece Laura and her friend Paul. Furthermore, the sudden arrival of Thomas causes disruption on the professor's land—especially when he begins to continue his murder spree...

About the film: "Have you noticed that our bodies are becoming radioactive? Does it bother you?"—*Professor John Mayer* (*Boris Karloff*). *Incredible Invasion* holds the distinction of being the only Hill-Ibáñez effort to credit a third director with the finished feature (José Luis González de León takes the honor; he was also the assistant director to Alejandro Jodorowsky on his timeless cult classic *El Topo*). It also marks the only instance during this period of his career where Hill negated on the script duties (he turned the duties over to *Spider Baby–Track of the Vampire* actor Karl Schanzer — marking the performer's one and only turn as credited writer). However, the fact that three directors and also three writers (Ibáñez and Luis Enrique Vergara are also credited with the screenplay) contributed to *Incredible Invasion* may give some indication as to why the final picture is such a mess. Even more than *Isle of the Snake People*,

Jack Hill, right, directs Boris Karloff in the film that would become *Dance of Death* (1968).

this lame sci-fi picture looks disjointed and irrational—with a scene involving Karloff speaking to a host of delegates clearly shot by two different filmmakers and at two separate times (the actor and his audience never appear in the same shot). There is also a dubious Karloff body double and a bad dubbing job standing in for the actor's real, and very distinctive, Southern English accent during one sequence. The result is not even good for some unintentional laughs—and the cut-rate flying saucer effects only add to the cheap desperation of the proceedings.

Asked about *Incredible Invasion*, co-scripter Schanzer is happy to talk about Karloff's professional attitude but has nothing positive to say about the actual finished product:

> I had worked for Roger Corman doing a little re-writing and Jack knew that; he knew I could write. He offered me the job, I had nothing happening and I was glad to have it. Meeting Boris was really incredible. The man had such a sense of himself. Not to say that he was egotistic in any way but he would get up, hit his mark and when Jack yelled "action" he was like a young man. He would do everything perfectly. Then when Jack yelled "cut," he would go back to his wheelchair and someone would wheel him away. I said, "Boris, why are you doing this? You don't

need the money or anything..." He replied, "I am going out in a harness" which is essentially what he did. I have always got a big kick out of the fact that I wrote one of the last films Boris Karloff did before he died. Of course, Juan Ibáñez took half of the writing credit because he translated it into Spanish. But it was still a good experience — just for meeting Boris alone.

Utilizing the same manor that was highlighted in *Dance of Death* (only without any of that film's gothic frissons), *Incredible Invasion* gives burly actor Yerye Beirute the lead role and, unfortunately, he proceeds to do everything within his power to mimic all the emotion of a plank of wood. Clearly supposed to be some kind of Victorian slasher *à la* Jack the Ripper, the man instead appears foolish and comical as he scours the night, with a permanently fixed glare of stifled desire, looking for women to strangle. Strangely, he returns home to a wife or girlfriend (their relationship is never explained) who refuses to argue about the fact she is sharing a house with a psychopathic killer. "I did it again," sighs Thomas, "I killed another one" — to which his pathetically loyal partner exclaims, "I accept you — you know I love you the way you are." The twosome's bizarre liaison is just one of the many insane elements of *Incredible Invasion*'s ludicrous storyline.

Indeed, the movie's "alien" — a blue-eyed, blonde-haired man in a white spacesuit — is even more surreal. One might think that he would at least have a scar on his face or something, *anything*, to indicate his otherworldly roots but no — he is simply a normal, run-of-the-mill twenty-something male; only with the power to take over people's minds. However, he doesn't even manage to do this terribly well: Thomas, who is ordered to penetrate Karloff's laboratory (why the spaceman never does this himself is, unsurprisingly, never explained) is constantly reverting back to his old self and looking for women to kill. In one instance of inspiration, the film pays homage to *Frankenstein* (1931) by having Thomas attack a deaf girl who is picking flowers by the side of a lake. Of course, this brings to mind the notorious scene in the original horror classic where Karloff's Monster throws a child into the water thinking she will float. In response to this the villagers light some torches and track down the Monster — and this is also repeated in *Incredible Invasion*, only the finding of the dead girl is horribly bungled. Inexplicably, Thomas stays by her side until literal milliseconds before some townspeople notice him and begin to start a chase — although they never manage to catch the killer despite being approximately one foot away from him before he stands up and runs away. Later in the picture, the villagers finally do arrive to kill Thomas, having tracked him to Karloff's old mansion, although the production values only allow for eight angry residents to turn up (far from the "hordes with torches" that the film promises).

Beneath the silly plot involving Thomas and his mission to destroy Karloff's destructive ray is some kind of, presumably, faithful and honest attempt to speak out against nuclear war (which in 1968 was a very real fear).

"If anyone again tries to use nuclear power, we shall have to return" says the alien at the end — a strange comment because it turns a character who has agreed to find women for Thomas to slaughter (in exchange for the use of his mind, no less!) into some kind of hero. One wonders why the alien never just took Karloff aside and explained that his machine was causing randomly passing spaceships some grief. Still, the idea that mankind's meddling with the solar system might produce disastrous results is something that *Incredible Invasion* shares with the same year's classic *Night of the Living Dead* wherein a "Venus space probe" is said to be the cause of a radiation leak that resurrects the buried.

Of the four Hill-Ibáñez pictures, Karloff is most wasted in *Incredible Invasion*. The focus of the film is placed on Yerye Beirute as Thomas, and he is not a strong enough performer to carry the picture on his own. The supporting cast is also lacking — and it says something when Julissa, who is a central — if hardly notable — part of other three Hill-Ibáñez productions, becomes conspicuous by her absence. Perhaps the best thing that can be said about leading lady Christa Linder is that she looks nice in her bath scene. (Thomas is caught spying on her by one of Karloff's assistants — who does nothing to admonish the man and instead treats such intrusive voyeurism as if it was the most acceptable thing on the planet.)

In only one scene is Karloff really given the chance to act, and this is when he is possessed by the same space matter that inhabits the mind of Thomas. "This is an extraordinary mind, primitive but powerful" comments Karloff, now under the spell. A short time later, the actor has to eject his niece and her friend from his office — but, unfortunately, the old gent's soft and soothing voice is strangely reassuring even when he is supposed to be curt and agitated. As a result, Karloff's transformation never really hits the mark, although he is given some of the most ham-fisted dialogue imaginable to work with. "Are you still having trouble with that body?" he murmurs to Thomas as the man fondles the statue of a nude woman — a moment that can only inspire unintentional hilarity. Indeed, as a roaming pervert who cannot even hold himself back from touching up inanimate objects, it is shocking that Thomas has gone without reprimand for so long.

It could be some kind of poetic justice when *Incredible Invasion* comes to an end with Karloff's manor on fire. It is certainly an apt signifier of the fiery relationship that produced these movies — a leap of faith on the part of Hill and an obvious intention to stay busy, even in his dying days, on the part of Karloff. Yet, of the four movies that they began together, not one is of interest to any but the most curious of Hill fans and, certainly in the case of *Incredible Invasion*, it is nothing less than a tragedy to see an actor whose finest work includes *Bride of Frankenstein*, *The Mummy* and *The Old Dark House* end his career with such lackluster productions. *Incredible Invasion* appears to have been the last of the Hill-Karloff projects to have been finished by co-director Ibáñez and the

film went unreleased until 1974.[3] It also remains the only film of this period to still be without a North American DVD release.

Fear Chamber (1968)

AKA: *La Cámara del terror* (original Mexican title); *Chamber of Fear*; *The Fear Chamber*; *The Torture Chamber*; *Torture Zone*

Jack Hill: Co-director/co-writer (with Juan Ibáñez)

Cast: Boris Karloff (Dr. Carl Mandel), Julissa (Corinne Mandel), Carlos East (Mark), Isela Vega (Helga), Yerye Beirute (Roland), Santanón (Dwarf), Eva Muller (Sally), Pamela Rosas (Fear Chamber Victim)

Producer: Luis Enrique Vergara

Plot: Dr. Carl Mandel sends his assistants Corinne and Mark on an exploration underneath the Earth's surface, wherein they discover a living, breathing creature formed out of rock matter. They bring it back to the doctor's laboratory for further examination; in order to keep this strange life form alive, they find out that it needs to be surrounded by human fear — which it "catches" with a giant, octopus-like tentacle. Dr. Mandel sets up a "fear chamber" which is interconnected to a hotel that his assistant Helga helps to run. There, unwitting young women find that their beds turn 180 degrees during the night, leading them into an old, dimly lit cave where snakes, lizards and bugs run rampant and a strange satanic cult practices human sacrifices. This is all simulated, however, and — after passing out from anxiety — the women are led to a nearby hospital to recover without any knowledge of what has actually transpired. Dr. Mandel eventually becomes conscience-stricken over his practices and calls for an end to the fear chamber — but his assistant Helga, and her new beau Roland, have different ideas...

About the film: "It can't die because it doesn't actually live. It functions." — *the not-very-perceptive Dr. Carl Mandel (Boris Karloff) upon discovering an eating, breathing, moving rock monster*. If *Incredible Invasion* marked the nadir of the Hill-Ibáñez partnership, then *Fear Chamber* represents the most worthy project to come from the twosome. As with *Isle of the Snake People*, this is far from a recommendation but whereas that title provided mild amusement simply because it was so bad, *Fear Chamber* actually spins a relatively engrossing story and gives Karloff a decent role for his screen swan song. It is also the most "Jack Hill" of the four films, with a sleazy, grungy undercurrent that would later surface, to more startling effect, in *The Big Doll House* and *The Big Bird Cage*— and a focus on sadomasochism and near-nudity that harks back to *Mondo Keyhole*. Yet, at the film's core is a good, old-fashioned fifties monster movie right down to its wildly ambitious creature (which is kept largely off-screen — presumably because the budget cannot support its extravagance) and the "mad scientist" character essayed by Karloff. Of course, not every-

thing gels together—and the plot is a mess—but there are still things to enjoy here.

After a puzzling opening scroll that tells us the story contains "the macabre horror of Edgar Allan Poe" (exactly why *Fear Chamber* would attempt to link its contemporary silliness to the master of gothic subtleties is anyone's guess), the movie presents us with a man and a woman clad in silver boiler suits. They are deep underground, in the same artificial cave that was used in *Isle of the Snake People* and *Incredible Invasion*—clearly indicating that the producers wanted to get the most from their cheapskate sets. Karloff is then brought onscreen for his perennial introductory appearance, communicating with the two explorers by radio. We learn that they are his daughter Corinne and her friend Mark. They begin to utter some nonsense about finding "an underground form of life ... for the well being of humanity" before a cry of distress alerts them to some animated rock matter. Amusingly, there is a bellow of "It's alive! It's alive"—with Karloff adding, "What's alive?" obviously paying homage to his most famous role in *Frankenstein* (1931). So far, then, *Fear Chamber* has played out as a fairly typical low-budget sci-fi fantasy—crazy old scientist, underworld exploration, bizarre creature and even some psycho-babble about saving humanity. But then it takes a sinister turn for the better...

A woman, lying asleep in her hotel bed, is awoken when her entire room spins around, leaving her trapped in a dull, barren chamber. There she sees a tied-down female being sacrificed (on another set that has been transported from the previous Hill-Ibáñez productions; part of the shameful pleasure in watching these titles is in spotting the re-used locations). There is also a pool of murky water—complete with snakes and bugs—which also houses the movie's creature, although the only glimpse that we get of it is in the form of a giant rubber octopus tentacle *à la* Ed Wood's immortal *Bride of the Monster* (1955). "You must be punished for your sins and wretchedness," states one of Karloff's burly assistants to our speechless young victim—understandably scared shitless after having been woken in the middle of the night to be told that she is about to be "baptized with the blood of Satan." However, we soon find out that this is all an elaborate set-up, with plucky young females being tormented in Karloff's "fear chamber" until they pass out—with their terror somehow fueling the newly captive rock monster with energy. No, this doesn't make a great deal of sense and, yes, Corinne and Mark are at least opposed to the idea of simulating murder and all that ... after all, these are supposed to be professional scientists. "We will take every precaution," offers Karloff—although Mark feels that their monster isn't worth entertaining. "So far all it's given us is a lot of promises," he moans—and it is worth noting that the story still hasn't explained to us exactly what the rock monster is supposed to offer anyone.

Nevertheless, Karloff finally sees that picking up strange woman and almost killing them probably isn't the smartest thing to be doing and the experiments

to provide the creature with food are called to a halt after an unexpected, but somewhat inevitable, death. Sadistic, wide-eyed lab worker Helga is far from pleased ("I wonder how much of herself Helga puts into her work," remarks Mark in regard to her sadomasochistic ways) and she immediately seduces the permanently wooden Roland into helping her continue with the violent tortures. Encouraged by Helga, Roland agrees that these new experiments in fear should conclude in an actual death every time — which the rock monster accomplishes by sucking the very life out of its victims.

The character of Roland is played by Hill-Ibáñez favorite Yerye Beirute. His performance in *Fear Chamber* is only slightly more convincing than his absolutely ham-ridden turn in *Incredible Invasion* wherein the stocky young gent was expected to carry off the lead role. In this instance, he is largely relegated to the background — where he belongs. Strangely, however, one critic maintains:

> It is worth noting that the evil Vega's three assistants are a hunchback, a dwarf and an Arab, providing a clear example that the physical and mental or moral blemishes so pervasive in films (and literature) is part of a racist way of thinking which here equates being an Arab with being a hunchback or a dwarf.[4]

This is an odd conclusion given that *Fear Chamber*, like all of the other Hill-Karloff projects, suffers identity problems through having been directed by two, non-communicating, and very different, filmmakers. However, even if this were to be taken at face value, there is no denying that the essence of evil in *Fear Chamber* is represented by actress Isela Vega herself and this, coupled with the film's lingering scenes of terrified women, would indicate that misogyny is more likely to be at work than any form of racism. There is also little evidence to suggest that the movie's Arab character, who speaks with an impeccably dubbed American accent, is truly "evil" (he is in fact slaughtered by Yerye Beirute's Roland when it is feared he may not be on the same page as he and Vega) or that Roland is a hunchback. Rather, this just seems to be the poor actor's posture. It should also be stated that very little separates the viewpoints of the villainous Helga from *Fear Chamber*'s heroine Corinne who believes that executing a thief "is not murder, it is justice." Don't you miss the days when films could have leading ladies with fascist viewpoints?

The problem with *Fear Chamber* — aside from a series of thoroughly dull characters — is that the script gives us no idea what the rock monster can actually provide the human race with. Karloff is all too happy to dither about and explain that it can "reveal the secret of our existence" but no one actually bothers to explain how it can do this. Indeed, the creature itself — which is shown in fleeting closeups and grows a large tentacle — appears to have a mouth that resembles an anus, complete with flatulent noises. Consequently, it is not the sort of thing to inspire fear, especially when — for all intents and purposes — the thing is immobile and someone has to be stupid enough to get in the way of its large, rubber appendage in order to be slaughtered. Another downside to

the picture is two needless subplots, one focusing on a blossoming romance between Corinne and Mark. Unfortunately, the lack of chemistry between the two leads gives it all the realism of a bad early afternoon soap opera. It also does nothing to serve the plot, rather it just comes and goes—perhaps, once again, reminding us of the fact that two directors, shooting in different countries, were responsible for the final product. The second subplot is Roland's inane search for diamonds—which leads to his final, James Cagney–inspired monologue of "I'm going to be king of the world" as he limps to his doom in the vast underground area where the rock creature was first discovered.

Yet, in spite of the movie's preposterous plot, inappropriately serious dialogue and a creature that is hyped-up to be so deadly that the production values cannot even reveal it, *Fear Chamber* is never too laborious to watch. For a start, Karloff is not as badly wasted here as he is in the previous three Hill-Ibáñez releases, with his appearances being spaced throughout the picture. At the very least, this means that you constantly remember that he is a part of the plot, rather than just carelessly thrown in during the opening and closing moments so as to give the cash-starved surroundings some semblance of celebrity (not to mention credibility). While the best moment of the Hill-Karloff relationship remains his final piano serenade in the otherwise dire *Dance of Death*, there is nothing for the great performer to be ashamed of in this fourth, and final, effort.

The best thing that can be said about *Fear Chamber* is that it is an inoffensive time killer. Hill even manages to throw in a totally irrelevant striptease (only without nudity!) and such deviance as a bound woman being whipped—but there is nothing too mean-spirited here. The final showdown in Karloff's laboratory is also nicely telegraphed with the old doctor working against time as his daughter, wrapped in the rock monster's hilariously fake clutches, has to stifle her fear in order to survive. In these closing moments is the very last screen performance of Karloff and, despite how ridiculous the action surrounding him is, the great actor maintains his composure and out-performs everyone else on the set.

While it is unfortunate that the Hill-Karloff pairing never produced a classic such as *Spider Baby*, at the very least *Fear Chamber* is a passable horror picture and one that most fans should find easy enough to spend time with. *Fear Chamber* is the sole DVD from the Hill-Karloff era to be available with an audio commentary from the filmmaker himself. Released by Elite Entertainment in 2006, it makes for essential listening.

Jack Hill's Memories of Working with Boris Karloff

How did you get involved in the four Boris Karloff pictures?

I knew a lawyer, who had represented me on a couple of things, and he also happened to represent some of the big Mexican producers and distribution

companies. This producer, Luis Enrique Vergara, had a deal with Boris Karloff to shoot four pictures back to back but Karloff couldn't go to Mexico because of the altitude, because he had emphysema. That meant that no one would insure him as well. When they came to me they had only managed to get one script written, which was by this couple who were not even professional screenwriters, and it was just scene after scene of people reading a letter — that sort of thing. So I met Vergara and told him I could do it and that I could come up with four stories. In the end I came up with three stories because he had one that he liked himself and that was the one that turned into *Incredible Invasion*.

I would say that one came out the worst of the four.

Yeah, I think I saw bits of it way, way back when I first got the tape. Karl Schanzer wrote the screenplay to *Incredible Invasion* after I had worked out a story from the producer's idea. In the end I gave it to Karl and he wrote it out. His final draft was only 60 pages long so I had to pad it out on the spot. But what the Mexican director did with it afterwards ... yeah, I think it was the worst of the lot [*laughs*]. Anyway, I had written these scripts in a couple of months and it was just an insane idea. We had to shoot all of the Karloff scenes in Hollywood and my father designed these beautiful sets that cost some money, but the producer wouldn't commit to hiring any crew until the last minute. I kept saying to him, "Listen, if we are going to get good people who are going to do this right, work fast and be on time, then we need to plan out in advance." Well, as it happened, he gave me this assistant director and — oh God — I don't even want to remember that. I personally brought in Roger Corman's production manager, who was actually very good, but little did I realize that he actually thought the whole thing was a joke. He even hired a clueless assistant who was a crony of the people who hung around Roger. There was no schedule either, and the Mexican actors came at the wrong time, for the wrong scenes, and what we hoped to shoot in three weeks took four weeks instead. Then it transpired that the producer was having financial problems — and not long afterwards he died of a heart attack, which was no wonder, and I never knew what happened to these films after that. Originally I was supposed to go to Mexico to finish the movies and I had constructed the scripts in such a way that all of Boris's scenes could be done in Hollywood — which is the sort of trick that you learn working for Roger Corman, you know what I mean? So for the longest time I never knew what happened to them and it wasn't until several years later that I discovered they were on video.

Did any of the films play theatrically?

I'm sure they did in other countries because I found a cinema poster for one of them on the Internet quite recently. I am sure they played theatrically in Mexico but they never played in the United States. Vergara had a distribution deal with Colombia — they were the only studio in Hollywood that had major South American distribution, but what came of that I have no idea.

Did you ever get to meet Juan Ibáñez, the man who is credited with co-directing these four movies?

No, he was in Mexico and I never met him. All I can say is that he totally changed what was in the scripts. That is why, to this day, I have not seen all of them. I have them right here but I have never looked at *Dance of Death* or *Incredible Invasion* from start to finish [*laughs*].

Vergara is also credited on each movie as the co-writer.

He took credit for writing?

Yeah, he took credit for co-writing each movie and the screenplay for *Incredible Invasion* is attributed to Ibáñez, Schanzer and Vergara.

This is actually all news to me [*laughs*]. I wrote the scripts, they were submitted to Karloff and then he said that he liked them and was happy to do them. Of course, by the time they got to Mexico, Vergara had made all sorts of changes. He kept telling me that things didn't seem right — that certain parts of each script wouldn't make sense to Mexican viewers. He hired me to make an international movie and then by the time he got back to Mexico he changed everything to what made sense to him [*laughs*].

How did you find the manor that appears in *Dance of Death* and *Incredible Invasion*?

Everything I did for these movies were interior scenes, shot on a stage in Hollywood. Whatever happens outside, as an exterior, took place in Mexico.

Right, although you shot all the Karloff stuff in each movie...

Yeah, I shot all the Karloff scenes and some of the other stuff that was done on the same sets.

Can you give a rough estimation on how much of these films belong to you? Obviously from what you have seen of them...

I've seen *Fear Chamber* and *Snake People* and my guess would be that maybe about a third of them belongs to me — some scenes that Boris wasn't in I directed on the same sets. But in the movies you might not be able to tell which sets were in Mexico and which were in Hollywood...

There is an atmospheric underground cave set that pops up in every one of the movies except for *Dance of Death*.

I remember the scene with Boris in it from *Fear Chamber*. Yeah, that was a great set, but the scene where the guy goes looking for diamonds at the end of *Fear Chamber*— that was not our cave, that was shot in Mexico.

If there is one thing about these four films that indicates your lack of involvement, it is the tight closeups on faces and objects. You have never shot that kind of thing yourself.

I always avoided closeups because these movies were shot for drive-in

cinemas. I very sparingly used closeups in my films, and only really when I want to draw attention to a point. In fact, I avoided doing closeups on Boris because he looked so bad.

In the Karloff movies there is a closeup on a face whenever something scary happens. It is really repetitive and annoying.

Well, I can tell you that anything that had Boris in it, or which was not on the same set that Boris was on, was shot in Mexico.

There is a cute bath scene in *Incredible Invasion* where the actress covers her private parts up with suds. It's a little reminiscent of *Mondo Keyhole*.

No, I never shot that. That might surprise you [*laughs*].

Some of the sadomasochistic stuff in *Fear Chamber* definitely predates your work on *The Big Doll House*, though.

We did the scene where the woman was being tortured — that scene which was done to scare the other girl. I filmed all that — everything that was done on that set was mine. All the torture and stuff was shot in Hollywood. Yeah, you could say that predates *The Big Doll House*...

What were your initial meetings with Karloff like?

He was living in England, although he had a house that he owned up in Benedict Canyon, and I went up there once to meet him. I didn't have much time to get to know him because I was filming these four pictures back to back but he was a really nice guy. He was very kind, very patient and very happy to be working because he was dying and virtually unemployable. Nobody could get insurance for him, so this Mexican guy just took a chance on him and he was taking a pretty big risk because Boris had to breathe oxygen and he was in a wheelchair on the set. If you notice, he is always in scenes where he is sitting down or in bed or something. He would do a scene, finish it and sit back down and breathe his oxygen again.

Out of all four films, his best scene is where he plays the organ at the end of *Dance of Death*.

Oh yeah, he was great doing that. Again, I don't really remember much about it but he had some good speeches in that film and he loved the idea of doing four different characters in four weeks, with different moustaches and beards and stuff. He really enjoyed it.

Was the end of *Dance of Death* your own homage to *The Phantom of the Opera*?

[*Pauses*] I am not sure — it is possible that I might have remembered something from it at the time. I just always liked Boris in a horror picture with a house going up in flames [*laughs*]. It was a bit of a tradition.

Julissa starred in three of the four Karloff pictures. What do you remember about her?

She was a pain in the ass. She was a big star in Mexico. I asked her to do a scene in a certain way and she told me, "I can't do that because I don't feel it." Oh, fuck you. I said right back, "Do it the way you feel it then." You know—we just had to get through it. I had no advance rehearsal time with them, they came up from Mexico and they were partying all night while the producer was at Disneyland. The whole production was a mess.

Yerye Beirute is very prominent in both *Fear Chamber* and *Incredible Invasion*.

Actually I had written that part in *Fear Chamber* for Sid Haig, who wanted to do it and he was very upset and disappointed because he was all set to come on board. But they had some problems with the Mexican union. That meant he couldn't do it, for whatever reason.

And Yerye is a really bad actor.

Oh, he's horrible! I didn't cast him though—they brought him in from Mexico. I didn't cast anyone in these movies—all I saw was their photographs.

Although they got something right with Yolanda Montes—she looks very sexy in *Isle of the Snake People*.

Yeah, I saw that movie and I thought she was quite sexy.

Karloff has a really bad double in that movie though.

Yes, although I do know that in a couple of places there were some scenes where he had to appear outdoors and we couldn't shoot anything exterior with him. I planned to use a double but we would only see his arms or his shoulders or something. But they got some guy that didn't walk like him or talk like him at all.

It's the same with *Fear Chamber*, although it is not quite as bad.

They just changed the whole thing for *Isle of the Snake People*—but with *Fear Chamber* they stayed pretty close to the original script.

***Dance of Death* was the first of the Karloff movies you shot, is that right?**

That was the first one we shot the Hollywood scenes for, yeah.

Why have you not seen them all the way through yet?

Well, I got the tapes, I watched two of them and I couldn't stand to sit all the way through the rest.

Do you think that setting *Dance of Death* and *Incredible Invasion* in Victorian times was quite ambitious considering the low budgets you had?

Well, it shouldn't have been. In Mexico they should have been able to continue that just fine. All it means is that you shoot on a stage and have the right costumes, you know? We didn't have any exteriors so there wasn't a budget problem with that—it wasn't any sort of additional expense and all of the wardrobe came from Mexico too.

Was the allure of shooting in color for the first time part of the reason you took the job?

No, no. By this time you couldn't shoot in black-and-white, you couldn't get your film released [if you did].

Nevertheless *Night of the Living Dead* was released in 1968 and it would become a huge success.

Yeah, that is true — although that was not your typical mainstream, commercial horror film. That was a really unusual situation and it just sort of caught on. If something like that could be made and you could get it into a theater, then that was okay, but the drive-in theaters would not play black-and-white movies anymore.

Can you make any comparison between Chaney and Karloff?

Well, Lon was an alcoholic and he felt really bitter that Boris was more famous than he [Chaney] was. He said, "That guy is not one bit better than I am" but Boris didn't drink and Boris was very good at speaking. Lon was very good with physical ability, with his body and with his timing, but when it came to speeches, Boris was better — at least I thought. I can't really compare them other than that but I would say Boris was better because he didn't get drunk. That was Lon's only hindrance.

When did you find out that you were not going to finish the movies in Mexico after all?

Well, it happened little by little — I just never heard from the guy again and I knew that he was in financial trouble. I knew that he needed to get refinancing because he had gone way over-budget.

Up until that time, was this the biggest budget that you had dealt with?

Yeah, although it is hard to compare budgets when you are only shooting a few scenes from a movie rather than the whole thing [*laughs*]. However, the facilities that we had — in terms of the sets — were much bigger than what I had ever had before. I had never had sets designed for me before other than very simple, small things. Yet, with the Mexican films, these were sets that my dad designed and they were really beautiful and complicated and they filled the whole floor. It was a real bummer, though, because, for one thing, I used the same cameraman that I used on *Pit Stop* because I really felt I owed him — everyone worked for spec on that movie, we got screwed and nobody got paid very much, you know? So I felt that I owed him for that but he was more concerned with making a name for himself than getting the picture done — he seemed to want to get everything done himself instead of using the crew, and they weren't very good anyway. So he went crazy with the lighting. He did things that Roger Corman's cameraman would have shot with one light [*laughs*]. He would put in 12 lights — and I had to fire him at the end of the first week, which I felt really bad about.

Did you get the Karloff jobs on account of *Pit Stop*?

Yeah, I had a rough cut of *Pit Stop*, a work print, that I showed to the producer. It wasn't finished yet.

With *Isle of the Snake People*, did you shoot any of the snake dancing scenes? Or any of the sequences where they begin resurrecting the dead?

No, that was all exterior stuff so I wasn't involved.

The scene at the end, where they are resurrecting the dead, *looks* like an interior shot.

Yeah, there was something we shot with Karloff I think, but it would have been on the stage. But you can tell with that movie — if Karloff isn't in it, I didn't have anything to do with it.

What was your reaction?

My reaction was that it was loaded down with all of this weird stuff with a dwarf, but some of the essential elements were still there.

There is also a scene of a dancer putting a snake into her mouth, which actually predates the famous sequence in *The Devil in Miss Jones*. Was that your doing?

No, no, I don't remember filming that at all. That would not be my thing and I wouldn't have done that [*laughs*]. Right now we are actually talking about bringing that script up to date.

What sort of horror movies were you influenced by during the making of these films?

Kind of your classic horror movies, like the stuff Roger Corman was doing and the old Universal horror movies, I always liked those.

Were you not interested in doing something more in vogue with the times? Herschell Gordon Lewis had experienced great success with his gore movies — *Blood Feast*, *Two Thousand Maniacs!* and so on.

No, I would not have wanted to do that — I much prefer the idea of getting a shock effect by what you think you see or what happens off screen. I always felt that with things like *Blood Feast,* the graphic gore took you out of the movie because you thought, "Oh look at that, how did they do it?" instead of being occupied in the drama. *Psycho* is a good example: You don't really see anything. You see the blood running down the drain but you don't see flesh being cut open or anything.

Although *Psycho* is a lot more violent than something such as *Spider Baby*...

Well, yeah, but that is down to what you imagine as well...

Why did you bring in *Spider Baby* actor Karl Schanzer to write *The Incredible Invasion* when you did the other screenplays yourself?

I just didn't have time to do four scripts.

Had he expressed any interest in writing before?

No, I don't think so.

So you took a big gamble.

Yeah, but he said he could do it and he did a fairly good job. I did give him a scene-by-scene outline and he put it into script form but when it only came to 60 pages, that was a little disappointing. I had to do a lot of further work on it to get a full-length story out of it.

Did you work with many of the special effects in *Incredible Invasion*?

The effects for that film were really rinky-dink. To do the special effects and to really make them work right, I had some kind of plastic stuff that I found. I think it was a children's toy and we shot it with two-way mirrors, it was done in some way to make it look like it was floating. I can't remember if we sent the film to Mexico right away for processing or if I saw dailies of that effect. I recall the producer had a video camera, which was very new at the time, and he placed it on top of our camera so that he could see the lighting and everything on a video screen, but it slowed us down so much that he stopped doing it.

Did you cast the actor who played the spaceman? He's really bad.

In the script it was not supposed to be an actor at all! It was meant to be these electric balls of light — and these two escaped prisoners come up out a cemetery, having dug their way out of a grave, and they have all these body parts coming up [*laughs*], but then this spaceship arrives, opens up and these two floating, glowing balls come out and they absorb into these guys. One of them thinks he sees a beautiful girl and the other thinks he sees a pile of gold. It is just an illusion because it is like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* — his body has been taken over by an alien.

That's not in there.

It's not?

No, the movie is about a spaceman possessing a Jack the Ripper type.

Then they completely changed the whole story. Although they couldn't have altered any of the Karloff stuff — there is an electrical force being absorbed into Boris's body...

Yeah, that takes place quite a way into the movie.

Well, it had to be in there because that is what we shot. But what you are describing — Jack the Ripper and stuff — none of that was mine [*laughs*].

Why no Julissa in *Incredible Invasion*?

I don't remember. I actually wouldn't have remembered she was even in the other three [*laughs*]—but I think she had to get back to Mexico. It was funny because she was kind of shy and then years later someone showed me this softcore porno that she had done.

There was no nudity in these horror films, of course.

Well, you couldn't do that back then so I didn't ask Julissa to take her clothes off. But she was just shy in general.

There is also some political rhetoric behind the storyline—the fear of a nuclear war...

In those days, that was the general feeling. I don't ever try to make political statements unless it makes a good story.

***The Fear Chamber* is the Karloff movie that holds up the best.**

Yeah, and that might be because it was the one they changed the least. It has the most promise for a remake as well—I want to do a more up-to-date, hi-tech thing with that.

By the time of the last days of the shoot on these four films, how was Karloff in terms of his health and demeanor?

Well, he was wonderful and very patient throughout the whole thing. The schedules were so screwed up that he would be scheduled to be there in the morning and it would be hours and hours before we could get to him. He pulled me aside one day and said, "I know what you are going through and I know how hard it is for you." He was very sympathetic.

Did he share any stories of his early days with you?

No, I actually didn't have time to talk to him. He told me he had recently done this film with Peter Bogdanovich [*Targets*] and he had high hopes for it. He thought it was good but it turned out to be a total flop in the theaters and he was very disappointed about that. The only other thing that was very recent back then was that he had been on the cover of *Life* magazine for his 80th birthday and he told me he was very grateful to have gotten the role of Frankenstein's Monster because it had created his whole career and he owed being on the cover of *Life* to that. He thought that *Life* magazine was the validation of his whole career—he was very proud of that. He would also get angry at the sound of Roger Corman's name.

Why was that?

Well, Roger had screwed him really badly.

Both *Fear Chamber* and *Incredible Invasion* pay homage to *Frankenstein*, although of course it might not be your doing. For example, a deaf woman is thrown into the lake in *Incredible Invasion* and it is a little like when the child is drowned by Karloff in the James Whale film.

Yeah, that was in the script but she wasn't deaf. That's news to me. Yeah, I guess you could say that was my homage to *Frankenstein*, although I would say it was just part of the genre, in a way. I didn't film that anyway.

In *Fear Chamber* there is the famous line "It's alive!"

Oh yeah, that was mine [*laughs*]—okay, that might have been.

We don't really get to see the monster in *The Fear Chamber*. Even keeping in mind the budget restraints, it is quite disappointing.

As I recall, they didn't do a very good job with it, although the whole point is that you were never really meant to see it. You would see tentacles coming out of it and that was all. You know, these movies were never meant to be great masterpieces of cinema—it was a job that I got, accepted as a challenge and it was a totally insane idea. Years later I was told by some other Mexican producers that—at the time—everyone thought I was a nut trying to do something like this. But I just wanted to get through them as easily as I could.

Although *The Fear Chamber* at least stands up as an average horror flick.

Well, it has some good stuff in it. I think they all did.

Although the killer toys in *Dance of Death* don't really work.

I haven't seen all of that film so I can't really comment.

Finally, why didn't you sue the producers of these movies? Didn't you have a contract?

Yeah, I had a contract but the guy was in Mexico and then he dropped dead so what are you going to do? But everything happens for the best because I went from these films to *The Big Doll House*.

Any regrets?

No, no. Just having the opportunity to work with a legend like Boris made it worthwhile. It was a pleasure having known him even briefly.

3

Return to Corman

Ich, ein Groupie (1969)

AKA: *Me, a Groupie*; *Higher and Higher*

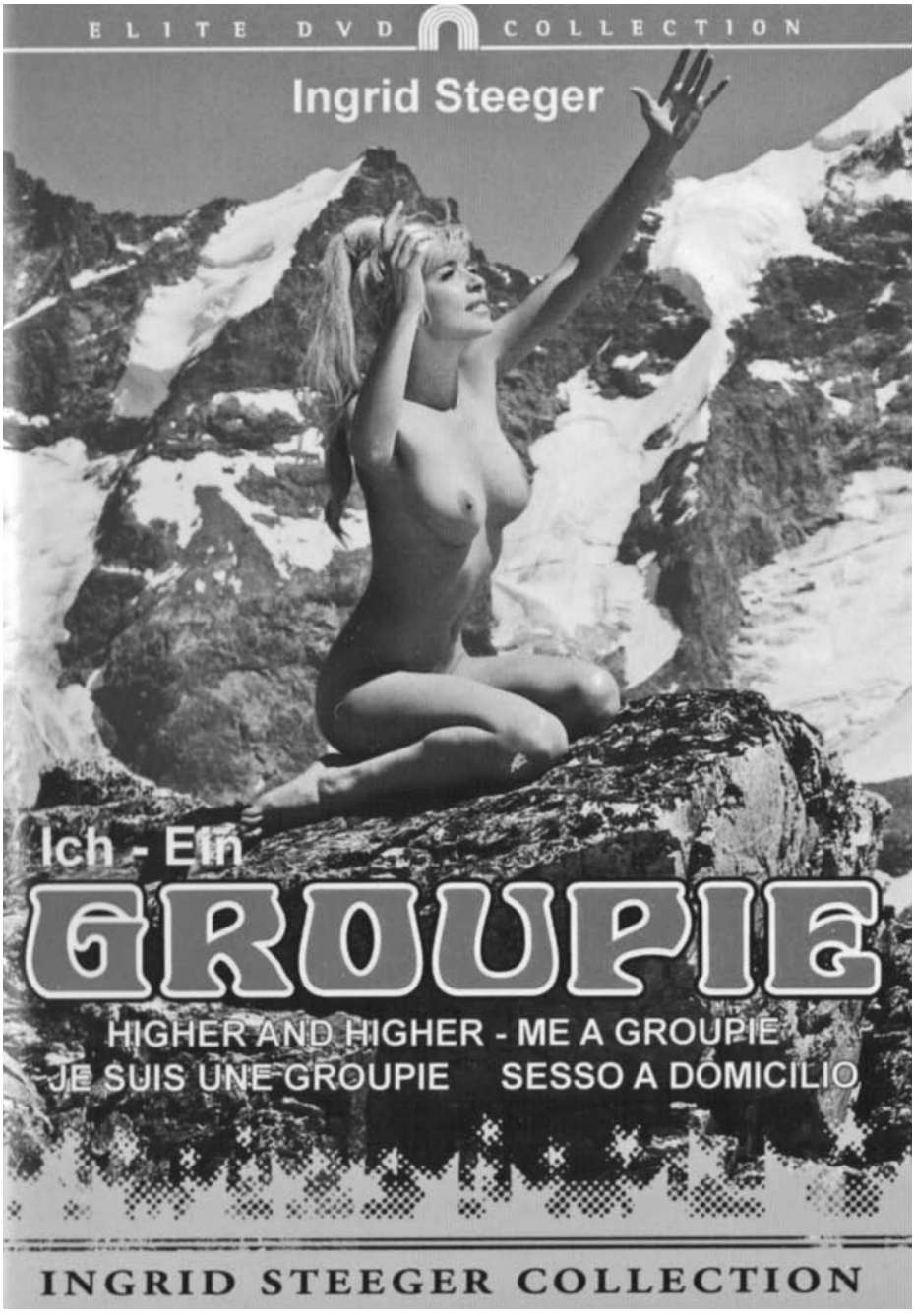
Jack Hill (uncredited): Co-director/co-writer (with Erwin C. Dietrich)

Cast: Ingrid Steeger (Vicky), Rolf Eden (Rolf), Vivian Weiss (Vivian), Li Paels (Lee), Stewart West (Stewart), Sharon Richardson (Sharon), Petra Prinz (Petra), Bruno Frenzel, Bernd Koschmidder (Himself—as "Bernie," the drummer for Birth Control), Bernd Noske, Reinhold Sobotta, Wolfgang Rumler, Joachim Schmidt, Andrea Scholz, Wolf-Rudiger Uhlig (Themselves)

Producers: Erwin C. Dietrich, Jane Schaffer

Plot: Vicky, a young, impressionable blonde, comes across a hippy rock band playing in London. She goes back to the group's house where she smokes dope with lead singer Stewart and makes love to him. In the morning, Stewart says he will take Vicky with him to Berlin, the next stop on his group's tour. However, he and his band disappear without her. As a result, Vicky hooks up with a smack addict called Vivian and decides to travel to Berlin in order to find the man she believes she is in love with. En route, the twosome sells drugs to make money, hook up with more strange men (including a gang of Hell's Angels motorcyclists) and finally reach the German capital, where much intake of illegal chemicals ensues. However, this carefree lifestyle can't last forever...

About the film: "You know what a groupie is? It was an English girl who wrote about them. The groupie could remember the tiniest details of all her lovers. Something I never could"—*Vivian (Vivian Weiss), clearly not a girl who lives a conservative lifestyle. Ich, ein Groupie* is the most troubled film in Hill's entire catalogue and that is saying something. Even taking into account his later problems with Roger Corman on *Sorceress* and the cheap rush-job of the largely disastrous *Mondo Keyhole* (not to mention his work on Boris Karloff's last four pictures), none has quite the legacy of *Ich, ein Groupie*, a picture that the erstwhile Swiss producer Erwin C. Dietrich still claims to have directed himself. At least in the case of the four low-budget horror films to stem from the Juan Ibáñez fiasco, one knows that whenever Karloff appears on the screen



The DVD cover for *Ich, ein Groupie* (1969).

it is the handiwork of Hill. *Ich, ein Groupie*, however, is not quite so simple. Indeed, on the 2003 Elite (German) DVD release (currently the only way to see the picture), Dietrich states in an interview done specifically for the disc:

> It should have been an American-Swiss co-production. Roger Corman would have provided the director and we would have taken over the financing and Roger Corman would have had the exploitation rights for America. Roger Corman brought the script and provided the director, a gentleman called Jack Hill... I looked in on the set every day and for five days the group was always busy with the same scene. After five days I said, "This will never become a film!" I gave Jack Hill his return ticket and told him to go back home. Then I interrupted the film for five days and I myself took over.

Hill tells a different story, claiming that the bulk of the picture belongs to him and that Corman would eventually take Dietrich to court. It also seems incredibly unlikely that Corman would voluntarily back out on *any* deal without a fight, making Dietrich's story of his taking over the picture without consequence remarkably suspicious. Furthermore, it seems rather stupid for Hill to lie about his involvement in *Ich, ein Groupie* considering that the feature is simply not very good and it would be all too easy to write the final result off as the handiwork of someone else. His story is backed up by Jane Schaffer, the uncredited producer of the picture, who states:

> My recollection [is] that Erwin had approached Roger to do a motorcycle film in Zurich and Roger passed this on to Jack. At that time I was already working for Roger, one of his "ace assistants," and Jack wrote a treatment which was okayed by Erwin. After arriving in Zurich, Jack found that Erwin was big in German porno movies, much more explicit than the stuff we were making back then, and wanted everything rewritten to include more sex but with less story. Jack was pissed, and this led to his dismissal. But by the end I would say that three-quarters of the film had been shot, as written and directed by Jack. Erwin added more sex scenes later ... Jack abroad was Jack at home — authoritative and enthusiastic. He got along well with the production team, particularly the cameraman. He was very creative about finding locations and making use of what he found interesting. He was also amused by the Swiss version of the Hell's Angels, who he said reminded him more of Boy Scouts, with their "chopped hogs" comparable to kiddie bikes.

Following only a few years after *Mondo Keyhole*, the film slots in surprisingly well to the director's filmography, revealing a mix of fascination and repulsion at the sordid underworld of sex and drugs. In *Mondo Keyhole* this took the shape of studying the increasingly depraved life of a pornographer, from his interest in bondage to his committing rape, and culminated in hallucinatory imagery — perfectly in keeping with the LSD age in which it was made. Similarly, *Ich, ein Groupie* has Ingrid Steeger drugged up and sexed up, with the film taking a distant, documentary-like approach to the onscreen debauchery, neither reveling in it nor embracing it but nevertheless perversely fixated on an ever-increasing level of decadence. The end result, although tawdry and feeling inevitably disjointed, packs some kind of low-rent punch in spite of the lousy dubbing, bad acting, awful soundtrack and no-budget

A member of the Swiss Hell's Angels (an uncredited extra) and Vivian (Vivian Weiss) in *Ich, ein Groupie*.

production values. Also frustrating is the fact that the film — at least judging from the German DVD — does not appear to have been transferred properly, meaning that some scenes of dialogue often emanate from off-screen when it is clear that the frame should be wide enough to accommodate the actors.

As stupid and random as its plot is, *Ich, ein Groupie* at least manages to be entertaining. This is not to say the film is any kind of classic (its plot is far too unhinged to make any semblance of sense) but it does manage to keep you watching as the gorgeous Steeger, in various states of undress, romps through European locales while smacked up, cracked up and sporting a libido that would put Hugh Hefner to shame. As with *Mondo Keyhole*, Hill also appears to have thrown in as many exploitable elements as possible, regardless of how smoothly they fit into the actual plot. Thus, we have numerous softcore sex scenes, biker gangs (presumably to cash in on the success of *Easy Rider*), acid trips (ditto), heroin abuse (a holdover from *Mondo Keyhole*), hippy rock bands and even a black magic ceremony. If you are wondering how this all holds together, it doesn't — rather the film is best described as a series of set pieces wherein Steeger haphazardly wanders from one encounter to the next without any semblance of learning from her experiences or becoming any more sensible. Rather, the actress becomes more and more debauched as the plot stretches on — one of the more fascinating elements of the film and the very thing that, ultimately,

leads to her character's death in a finale no doubt inspired by the far superior *Easy Rider*.

Consequently, if *Ich, ein Groupie* is about anything then it is surely about wasted youth. In Steeger's Vicky and Weiss's Vivian, Hill shows us two girls who live only for the moment and without any respect for the generation of the past. This is perhaps best spelled out when, during their rail trip across the Swiss border from Holland, the two are caught by a peeping Tom who sees Vicky stuffing drugs into her underwear. The man, who looks old enough to be her father, promptly informs the customs officer who roams the train. When the investigator questions the girls, Vicky is adamant that he does not want to see what she has *really* had to put in her knickers. Ashamed, the man backs away—hinting once more at a bodily (even sexual) frankness, and liberation, on the part of the girls that an older generation finds difficult to relate to. Later in the picture, the heroin-addicted and cash-starved Vivian seduces an older man in a bar by getting him drunk and teasing him with the promise of casual sex. Presumably unable to comprehend any threat from the attractive, waif-like blonde who sits opposite him, the man takes her home only to be robbed and left semi-conscious on his own bed.

In one of their conversations Vicky confides to Vivian about her one-night stand with a stranger, stating, "He asked me to take it in his mouth but it was something I had never done." Vivian responds with, "You were born to live like an old maid." In light of this, it is easy to see Vicky's story as one of being easily led—falling in with the wrong crowd and, ultimately, sealing her own demise through blindly following a reckless, but temporarily rewarding, lifestyle. Thus, even when Vicky eventually seduces a member of a band (amusingly, and somewhat topically, called Birth Control), it is due to a bet from her friend that the drummer is "the hardest to get." In order to prove Vivian wrong, Vicky immediately goes to work, giving the musician fellatio on stage (amusingly, the audience is so wrapped up in their various chemical highs that no one seems to notice). The drummer's subsequent conversation with his new lady goes: "Want to go back to my place?" "I'd love to." "Well, come on." This is not to say that the movie sneers at such promiscuity; rather, it uses the snowballing liberalism of its leading character simply to exploit Steeger's nude body—a decent proposition for any straight male but also surprisingly tiring after the umpteenth shot of the actress without any clothes on.

This also makes any reading of the picture tricky. While it is tempting to see *Ich, ein Groupie* as a warning against the legalization of soft drugs (Vicky starts the film with her first taste of marijuana, which she initially protests against, but quickly graduates into the LSD and the shot of heroin that kills her), the character seems to be there only so that she can be placed into situations that require nudity. Obviously to have her high on drugs gives the film a reason to strip her and have her skinny dip, have sex, ride on the back of a motorcycle and/or romp around random locations.

Steeger would go on to become something of a sex star; however, her onscreen radiance in *Ich, ein Groupie* is decidedly faint. While the terrible Cockney accent that overdubs her every line of dialogue does not help much, the actress radiates very little allure on camera. In the one scene where she really needs to appear like the second coming of Eve, that being where she seduces the supposedly hard-to-get drummer, she instead fumbles on stage and "grooves" abysmally in order to attract his attention. The result, as in the scene where Steeger goes skinny dipping, carries no eroticism whatsoever. Even in her softcore fumbles, the actress shows little chemistry with her celluloid partners. And while it is hard to argue with her natural, voluptuous beauty, the film's matter-of-fact approach does little to exploit this (and the presence of hairy armpits seems remarkably ill-advised for a film so clearly aimed at a male clientele). Steeger's sex scenes—and the various sequences of her without clothes—are shot in grimy locations or hark back to a nudist film (such as when the actress, without explanation, cavorts through some woodland without any clothes on). Consequently, for as daft and watchable as the film is, there really is not a lot going on in it. Steeger's character is required only to take a lot of drugs, have a lot of sex and then die (run over by a car while high on a mix of acid and heroin, fed to her after Vivian asserts, "Let's make this a night to remember. Let's get as high as a kite!").

Perhaps the picture's biggest saving grace is its travelogue footage. Shooting, no doubt without a permit, in London, Amsterdam, Zurich and Berlin, there are some tremendous images of major European capital cities, not to mention the truly mind-boggling sight of Steeger running nude through the Swiss countryside (with the Alps behind her) at the film's climax. Moreover, there is at least some power to the lengthy sequence wherein Vivian injects Vicky with heroin at the movie's climax. One of the most dreamy, and horrifying, scenes in the picture, it is followed by a scene where Steeger runs, naked, from her friend's apartment only to be splattered in her life-ending road accident. However, this attempt to echo the pessimistic view of the closure of the "free love" period (as mentioned, this is very much in the same vein as *Easy Rider*) does not pack half the punch of watching Vivian inject heroin into her foot before shooting up her friend. With only the barest amount of sound, the scene is framed in such a skuzzy, low-rent room, and without any touch of glamour, that—in this fleeting moment—an actual moral conscience appears to be directing from behind the scenes. Unlike in previous sequences, where the use of drugs or confrontation appears only to be as a means to showcase Steeger's nude body, here one can genuinely hear a voice of "heroin is bad." While this is not the most revolutionary of statements, and certainly does not justify sitting through the entire film for, it at least makes you feel that all of the previous onscreen excess has come full circle. It is, however, rather depressing that one needs to wait until the very end of the picture to feel as if anything—*at all*—has been said.

Ich, ein Groupie has at least one other curious element, especially when one considers that, according to Hill, the film began shooting in summer 1969. In one brief scene, where Steeger frolics nude in a lake, her peaceful romp is interrupted by a gang of rowdy Hell's Angels. While their initial intrusion (which hints at rape) is met with resistance by Steeger, we soon cut to her—along with one of her friends—riding on the back of a motorcycle; this seems to indicate that the rough 'n' ready bikers have quickly overpowered the weaker, wimpier hippy girl (and in her most vulnerable state at that). Considering the very real horror that was about get inflicted on the "free love" crowd by a gang of Hell's Angels at the infamous Rolling Stones concert at Altamont on December 6, 1969, there is something grim about watching this scene. As unintentional as it may have been, here—at least—*Ich, ein Groupie* brings together two parallel worlds that would eventually meet in real life with more disastrous results.

However, *Ich, ein Groupie* is far from a successful film. Its horrible dubbing, for a start, immediately makes the picture difficult to tolerate while the sheer suddenness of its various plot turns happen without any build-up or provocation. Steeger also, as beautiful, as she is, radiates very little celluloid presence. Even so, *Ich, ein Groupie*—in all of its apparent rushed and thrown-together glory—casts a spell as a truly bizarre, not to mention unpredictable, hippy-drugs movie that is unique and outlandish. As a result, one only wonders if, had Dietrich given Hill the chance to prep and finish the picture, its crude atmosphere of chemical-induced self-indulgence may have been more successfully realized.

Jack Hill's Memories of *Ich, ein Groupie*

How did an American filmmaker get transported to another continent to work on a crazy sex and drugs movie?

It all began when I found a script called *The Big Doll House*, which I brought to Roger. He and I made a deal to develop that and make the movie, but Roger had to go abroad to shoot another picture at the time so this thing came up. Erwin Dietrich knew Roger because he had licensed some biker film to him and he asked him if he would like to direct a movie for him. Roger was not interested in that but he said that he had this new guy, Jack Hill, who had just done a really good movie—meaning *Pit Stop*—and he said that I should be sent across. Plus, I had experience working as a rock musician. So the title was going to be *I, a Groupie* and Roger asked me if I wanted to do it. I said that I would love to do it because *The Big Doll House* was going to have to wait until he got back from his travels. So Dietrich agreed and we made a contract that specified the picture would be shot in English so that Roger could release it and I don't remember the other details—Dietrich pretty much ignored everything anyway [*laughs*]. So I asked him to send me the script and Dietrich told me that it was not quite ready yet but that he would have it for me when I got to

Zurich. I was a little leery about that for obvious reasons but, anyway, I really wanted to make a film in Europe and *The Big Doll House* was on the back burner so I went. They sent me the plane tickets and I went with my friend Jane Schaeffer, who had worked with me on *Pit Stop* and who was going to be the credited producer on *The Big Doll House* and *The Big Bird Cage*.

However, she is not credited on *Ich, ein Groupie*.

Yeah, and it will become clear why that is the case. But, anyway, I wanted her with me as a witness and to keep track of things. I was going to have to edit the picture too and I wanted somebody to take notes for me. She flew across separate from me and I remember that I got off the plane in Zurich and the first thing I did was go to the meeting area in the airport. So I am waiting and I am waiting and there is nobody there. All of a sudden I see this guy standing around at the end of the terminal so I waved at him and it was Dietrich and his cameraman, Peter Baumgartner. I said, "Okay, so where is the script?" And I was told, "We don't have a script, we don't even have a story—we just have a title." I should have turned around and taken the next flight out...

Why didn't you?

Well, what would I have had then? Plus, Jane was on her way on another plane so I decided I would go along with it and see what developed. I also asked Dietrich if I could see one of his films so that I could get an idea of what he had done but he didn't want me to see any of them. If I had seen them, I would have definitely turned around and gone home because they were softcore porn and we could not release that in the United States at the time. But, anyway, they gave me this nice little hotel in Zurich and they sent me to Berlin, supposedly to interview actors—and at the same time I was trying to figure out a story idea, which I did. I got to Berlin but the reason they sent me there was as a publicity thing—a Hollywood director making a film for Dietrich. Plus, if they shot in Berlin they got some kind of tax break. He had an office there and part of the picture was operated out of Berlin—I did not even have to shoot there to get a tax break [*laughs*]. So I was interviewing actresses and I found an 18-year-old redhead and nudity was no problem for this girl—and back then, nudity could be a problem for some performers. Now, at this time, not knowing what kind of movies Dietrich had done, I did a little test with her and thought she was interesting and talented. I got back to Zurich and Dietrich took one look at this actress and told me he could not stand redheads. What he wanted all along, and I realized this later, was Ingrid Steeger. This was just a charade that I went through, finding another actress who could speak English. So, basically, I went back to my hotel and said, "When you find someone you like, let me know." He brought me Ingrid, who could not speak a word of English which was a complete violation of the contract. I had originally said I needed six weeks of prep because I hadn't even written a script but he said, "No, no—we have to start shooting right away" and it was because he had his

vacation all set. Again, every day I thought, "Should I just go home?" and I talked to Jane about it and the problem was that if I just walked out, I would have nothing. But if we could make a picture that was releasable in the States, I would get a nice share of it.

So I decided to just accept it as a challenge and I worked out a story and gave the characters the dialogue as we went along. I also shot a lot of scenes that didn't really require dialogue—I remember that I found an English rock group and, because they could at least speak the language, I shot stuff with them. There was a Swiss actress, Vivian Weiss, who spoke English really well and I used her. But I soon realized that what Dietrich wanted was softcore porn—which I figured I could cut down when it got too rough. So there would be a sex scene and I would say, "Okay, cut" and the cameraman, who was also Dietrich's assistant, would just keep going and shout, "Fuck her, fuck her." I would be standing there with my mouth wide open, just appalled at what was going on. One of the early scenes was in a nightclub where a rock group was playing—it is where Steeger gives the drummer a blow job—and I picked the drummer because the lead singer was so ugly [*laughs*]. Anyway, this is the thing that Dietrich is referring to when he says I was spending time on the same set—actually, it was two days on the same set and it was a big scene so I covered it from one direction and then I wanted to cover it from another direction, to take advantage of the big crowd that we had there. Well, Dietrich came onto the set and he started freaking out, saying, "You cannot do this" and he had not been around to see what I had been doing. I almost walked off right there and then but I finally got the sequence finished and then I found some Hell's Angels, and working with them was a lot of fun. They were walking around acting really tough, pattering themselves after the California Hell's Angels, but actually they were do-gooders, they would help old ladies across the street [*laughs*]. They took their names from *The Wild Angels*, which was one of Roger's movies. I thought, "Some of this is going to be really great after all" and then this thing happened when I had this location scouted but Dietrich had this other deal—and I told him that I had not prepared to shoot somewhere else. I could see the handwriting on the wall at that point and that evening his production assistant came to my hotel and told me that Dietrich was going to finish the picture himself. I was also told that I did not need to stay in Zurich any longer, which I thought was pretty insulting because I could stay as long as I damn well wanted! So I began freaking out because I had to let him break the contract in order to maintain my own [legal] position.

Right, so you could not just quit?

Yeah, I couldn't walk out on him because then I would forfeit whatever position I would have on the deal. But he took over shooting the picture and the funny thing is that the next day I was walking around the city and I saw him with his crew and he was shooting a scene on the very location that he told

me he could not use. I thought that I had enough evidence that he had violated the contract — he hadn't provided a script, his lead actress could not speak English — so Jane and I took off.

Did Steeger really not speak one word of English?

No, she didn't speak English so I shot a lot of stuff that didn't have much dialogue, and we had a rock group that did speak English. We had one group that did and one that didn't. And we had a good-looking actor who spoke English so I shot a lot of stuff with him, but most scenes really didn't require dialogue. We just improvised the dialogue and dubbed it later. But she was very cooperative. I had to direct her through a translator. She did her thing — I don't remember too much about her but I never told Dietrich the story I had figured out. So when he wanted to fire me, he didn't have the story but I found out later that this Swiss actress told him about it. We became very, very friendly with one of the cast — Vivian Weiss — and I guess she gave it to him.

How did you find Vivian Weiss? She does not appear to have ever done another film.

I found her in Zurich. She was not an actress, she just happened to be there and spoke English. And she was willing to take her clothes off, I suppose.

What kind of presence was Dietrich while you were filming?

Dietrich would keep me sitting for hours while he made deals on the telephone and then he would rush me to some location and I usually had no idea what we were doing there. When I saw the finished picture later, because we had a lawsuit against him, it turned out that his company was registered in Lichtenstein, which was a tax haven at the time, and he couldn't be sued. But this was the really funny part of the story: He claimed that he had no obligation to Roger or to me and later on when the picture was finished, Roger and I met with the cameraman in Zurich and he very foolishly, on his part, screened the movie for us. Well, it turned out that even though I had only directed for a couple of weeks, and Dietrich had many weeks to shoot after that, two-thirds of the movie was my footage [*laughs*]. So we hired a lawyer in Zurich and that was when we found out we couldn't sue him. But later Roger got a letter from a distributor that he knew in New York saying that this guy was offering a movie called *I, A Groupie* as a Roger Corman presentation. Now Roger had nothing to do with it so he got his lawyer to contact them and he returned with a letter stating that this was not true, that no one was using Roger's name ... only the return address on the letter read, "Roger Corman Presents *I, A Groupie*" [*laughs*]. Now, can you imagine the stupidity of this guy? The lawyer finally got him on a criminal charge because he was using Roger's name to promote his movie — and that was illegal in Switzerland, regardless of whether he was based in Lichtenstein or not. So in order to stay out of jail, Dietrich had to pay Roger off — he paid him some kind of big fee for my work on the film and I didn't get

a cent. I remember that Dietrich claimed I was on drugs and all sorts of nonsense but they got him on a criminal charge so he had to try and excuse himself. It didn't do him any good, they ruled against him.

One of the bands in the films is horribly over-dubbed — their lips are totally out of sync with the music.

That is probably because the band was not singing their own material — they were singing their own versions of songs that were copyrighted to somebody else.

Do you remember what scenes you did not direct?

I don't honestly remember — it has been too long. I did a lot of the action scenes. I did the stuff with the motorcycles, where she is riding naked on the back of a bike — I made all that up...

The only DVD release of the film is in Germany and the picture is cropped so that the actors are sometimes not even on the screen during their dialogue scenes. Do you remember what ratio you shot the picture in?

The cameraman was supposed to frame everything in 1.85.1× but maybe he didn't.

There is some surprisingly explicit nudity in the film — including pubic hair and a man's genitals. Quite unusual for the time, wasn't it?

That might have been one of those things where I said "cut" and they did not. I do remember the scene when the guy's dick was showing — I almost walked out there too [*laughs*]. The production crew was just ignoring me and the cameraman kept shouting, "Fuck her! Fuck her!" It was one of these things where they didn't rehearse and they just kept rolling.

Did you have a permit to shoot the brief scene with Steeger in London?

I didn't shoot in London. I did ask if they could go to England but they told me they could not afford it but they did that anyway.

When was the film shot?

It must have been July or August 1969, because I went to the Philippines in late '69, and I recall that Dietrich had a date set for his vacation in Ibiza, which seemed more important to him than making a good film, and which must have been early September.

Did you shoot the scene of Steeger, naked, romping through the Swiss Alps?

No, not that I recall.

She does die at the end. Was this some kind of warning against leading a hedonistic lifestyle?

No message intended! Not by me, anyway, and I doubt that Dietrich would have either. I approve of hedonistic lifestyles and used to have one myself.

Did you direct the scene, at the end of the film, where Steeger is injected with heroin?

I do recall such a scene, but I don't recall that it took place at the end. I'm not sure — it has been 40 years now!

I have to ask you this — was there a lot of drug use going on behind the scenes?

Drugs? Yeah — of course.

Can you tell me more?

Well, there was a lot of acid and everyone was smoking this combination of hash and tobacco.

Did you indulge in any of it?

Only once — for just a moment when I wanted to show the players I was working with that I was one of them.

Was *Ich, ein Groupie* ever released in America?

No, it wasn't — it would have been X-rated so no distributor would have taken it. Neither would they have wanted to deal with the "Roger Corman Presents" problem.

The Big Doll House (1971)

AKA: *Bamboo Dolls House*; *Women's Penitentiary*

Jack Hill: Director

Writer: Don Spencer

Cast: Judith Brown (Collier), Roberta Collins (Alcott), Pam Grier (Grear), Brooke Mills (Harrad), Pat Woodell (Bodine), Sid Haig (Harry), Christiane Schmidtmer (Miss Dietrich), Kathryn Loder (Lucian), Jerry Franks (Fred), Gina Stuart (Ferina), Jack Davis (Dr. Phillips), Letty Mirasol (Leyte), Shirley de las Alas (Guard)

Producers: Jane Schaffer, Roger Corman, Cirio H. Santiago

Executive Producers: Eddie Romero, John Ashley

Plot: Collier, a pretty brunette, is sentenced to 99 years in a third world prison after murdering her husband. She is holed up in a tiny cell with five other women — Alcott (a blonde hussy), Bodine (a badass), Grear (a statuesque lesbian), Harrad (a smack addict) and Ferina (the quiet one). The prison itself is lorded over by the sadistic warden Lucian, who dishes out beatings to disruptive captives while a mysterious masked figure looks on approvingly. After some initial friction between Collier and her cellmates, the women bond together in order to hatch an escape plan with the help of perpetually horny delivery men Harry and Fred. It all ends in gunfights, fisticuffs and the exposure of the individual who runs "the big doll house."

About the film: "Search them. Inside and out"—*Lucian (Kathryn Loder) instructs her employees to be thorough with the new female detainees.* Having now worked on several movies, but without any taste of commercial success,

Hill had to believe that *The Big Doll House* was his chance to "make it" in Hollywood, even when it became clear that the direction of the project was being taken out of his hands. Consequently, the film's genesis is far from smooth — with the original script being thrown out before shooting began and Hill's old *Blood Bath* colleague Stephanie Rothman reportedly seeking to take over the movie. In his autobiography *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime*, Roger Corman speaks fondly of the work that Rothman had done for him, stating that she "directed *The Student Nurses* in three weeks for $150,000."[1] This, coupled with Hill's disastrous experience on *Ich, ein Groupie*, may indicate why Corman may have been interested in handing the project to someone who had already delivered a profitable exploitation project to him. Moreover, the producer decided to locate the cut-rate action out in the Philippines. No doubt this had a lot to with the fact that he could then afford to shoot additional movies back-to-back with much of the same cast and crew. Faced with either leaving the film or making the best out of a bad situation, Hill chose the latter option and, unwittingly, created a huge money spinner that would give birth to the series of movies that we now know as the women in prison genre. Hence, as has been documented, "Jack Hill would become the chief auteur of the made-in-the-Philippines (women in prison film) appropriating key peep-booth motifs (sans hardcore) and smoothing them out with more professional production values."[2]

Asked about filming *The Big Doll House* in the Far East, producer Jane Schaffer recalls:

> Touching down in the Philippines was exciting for me, but I was one of the few from our U.S. group who didn't love it there, due to the poverty, the '50s American culture and the smell of rancid cooking oil everywhere. Nevertheless, the crews we worked with couldn't have been nicer, Eddie Romero in particular. I learned that saying no to a request was almost impossible for the Filipinos, even when they had no capability of fulfilling it, so we learned to make contingency plans. However, there were typhoons, a roofless sound stage with birds nesting above and lots of delays. But Jack was a trooper. I remember that he took a crew out in the rice terraces around Baguio to find another exotic location, and we tramped in the mountains for about five hours to find a little village with houses on stilts where they hadn't seen white people before. Our leader did not flag and the resulting shot was probably only five seconds long in the movie, but Jack was usually completely on top of the budget and schedule. I was "co-producer" for the American group, but still pretty clueless. I tried not to communicate much with Roger for fear of being found out, so we settled things for ourselves with cast problems and such. I remember feeling such a failure when I had to meet with tax authorities who wanted us to pay taxes and I couldn't find a way out of doing so.

In the wake of *The Big Doll House*, Corman would green-light the shooting of more exploitation shockers in the Philippines, including *Women in Cages*, *The Hot Box*, *Black Mama, White Mama* and Hill's follow-up *The Big Bird Cage*. In each of these movies, the emphasis is on softcore sex and violence — although Hill plays both of his movies for trashy laughs as opposed to the sadistic titil-

lation that the genre would later sink into. For Corman the recipe of semi-naked women behind bars remained ripe for further exploitation — with such later cult items as 1973's sleazy historical item *The Arena* (with Pam Grier once again headlining) and Jonathan Demme's 1974 effort *Caged Heat* also making their mark. Thus, while *The Big Doll House* may not be an especially good movie, its place in the history of exploitation cinema is secure — even if Corman himself admits that he was not entirely satisfied with the picture:

> I had just started New World, this was the late 1970s, and I was doing some straight exploitation films that I was pretty certain would make money. I felt the women-in-prison picture would eventually become a staple of exploitation cinema so I sent Jack Hill over to the Philippines to do *The Big Doll House* and it actually turned out a little sexier and a little more raw than I wanted. So I was not that pleased with the film, I felt it was a little too rough, but it was a tremendous box office success and it helped establish my company so I sent Jack back to do *The Big Bird Cage*.

When *The Big Doll House* was released in 1971, Hill claims that it was the biggest independent movie up until that time, although Corman denies this, stating, "No, it wasn't the highest [grossing] in history but it was one of the highest. When it first came out, *The Wild Angels*, in the sixties, had been the highest grossing independent in history." All the same, Corman remembers that "the franchise holder in New Orleans, a heavily Catholic city, told me that after he saw the numbers on *Big Doll House* Friday night, he lit a candle in church on Sunday to the film. He said he never made a profit like that in his life — and he had been in the business for forty years."[3] Unsurprisingly, then, *The Big Doll House*'s success is almost certainly illustrated through the number of spin-off movies that followed it. Most notorious, of course, is 1974's *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*, which took the concentration camp setting of 1968's infamous *Love Camp 7* and added the sort of over-the-top scenarios and kinky punishments that Hill had depicted in *The Big Doll House*. Even so, the remarkably grim and nasty violence that is shown in *Ilsa* is far removed from that of the Corman-Hill projects. Hence, while *The Big Doll House* may show female prisoners being electrocuted or being threatened by a dangling cobra, *Ilsa* — and the other women-in-prison flicks that followed — would opt for a far more graphic form of sexual violence to get bums on seats.

Nevertheless, it is indisputable that after the success of *The Big Doll House*, films such as *Ilsa* (which spawned two official sequels) and the Italian "video nasty" *SS Experiment Camp* (1976) began to find a considerable cult audience — while Spain's Jess Franco, who originated the form with the more obscure *99 Women* (1969), made a career out of churning out such dramas as *Women Behind Bars* (1977) and *Sadomania* (1981). As with *The Big Doll House*, both of these movies are set in an unnamed, but exotic, land and the captives are all scantily dressed, attractive women, put behind bars in the shoddiest of banana republic prisons for committing minor crimes. The lesbianism that Hill only

hints at in *The Big Doll House* would also become part and parcel for the genre — as essential to the flimsy plots as the brutal, burly warden or the final prison break.

However, when compared to these genuinely distasteful shockers (Franco's *Sadomania*, for instance, features a scene where a female prisoner is raped by an Alsatian dog), *The Big Doll House* now seems remarkably tame. This is the way things happen in the exploitation genre: An initial hit (in this case *The Big Doll House*) is soon superseded by a series of movies that focus on the cold basics of what made their inspiration such a success (lesbian sex, kinky violence and the prison scenario being the culprits here). Naturally, a number of budding producers decided to mix *The Big Doll House*'s core audience-pleasing elements with the later excesses of *Ilsa* and this resulted in releases whose only claim to fame was being even more brutal and sexually explicit than the last. Somewhat inevitably, by the mid-eighties the trend had faded from the big screen and direct-to-video schlock such as 1987's *Slammer Girls* and 1988's *Purgatory* were among the few titles that would continue the legacy begun by Hill in the early seventies.

As with *Spider Baby*, *The Big Doll House* has one of its stars sing the theme song: The movie memorably kicks off with Pam Grier's rendition of "Long-time Woman." (It may be familiar to fans of *Jackie Brown* [1997]— director Quentin Tarantino also used the number.) To Hill's credit, he immediately gives the viewer — via a series of short, sharp sequences — an idea of how harsh and unforgiving prison life is in his movie's fictional jail. For example, right at the get-go we see a dehydrated, sickly young woman imprisoned in a hanging wooden cage out in the baking sunshine of the film's tropical setting. From there we meet pretty brunette Collier (Judith Brown), sentenced to 99 years hard labor. She is stripped and a doctor even examines her most private areas (off-screen, but Hill makes sure we know *exactly* what is going on) before she is sent into a prison cell with five other girls. On the way to her cell we also get to glimpse a battered and bruised body, concealed by a white sheet, pass by on a stretcher. Clearly, this "Big Doll House" is not going to be much fun.

Sharing a cell with Collier is Grear (Pam Grier — her film's namesake being a strange coincidence), Alcott (Roberta Collins), the heroin-addicted Harrad (Brooke Mills), the token Philippine girl Ferina (Gina Stuart) and Bodine (Pat Woodell). We are told that Bodine has been imprisoned because she and her boyfriend have been fighting to overthrow the tyrannical government of whichever country *The Big Doll House* is set in. Of course, there is the obvious presence of Filipino actors in the film but, regardless of this, none of the cast ever acknowledges what part of the globe they are imprisoned in (perhaps to fend off any accusations of xenophobia). Instead, *The Big Doll House* is set in an anonymous third world locale — although the mention of militia action, and Hill's sporadic use of jungle scenery, may indicate that the story was intended to be set somewhere in Central America (possibly Uruguay, given that nation's

notorious torture of political prisoners—something that was being well publicized back in the early 1970s) as opposed to the Far East.

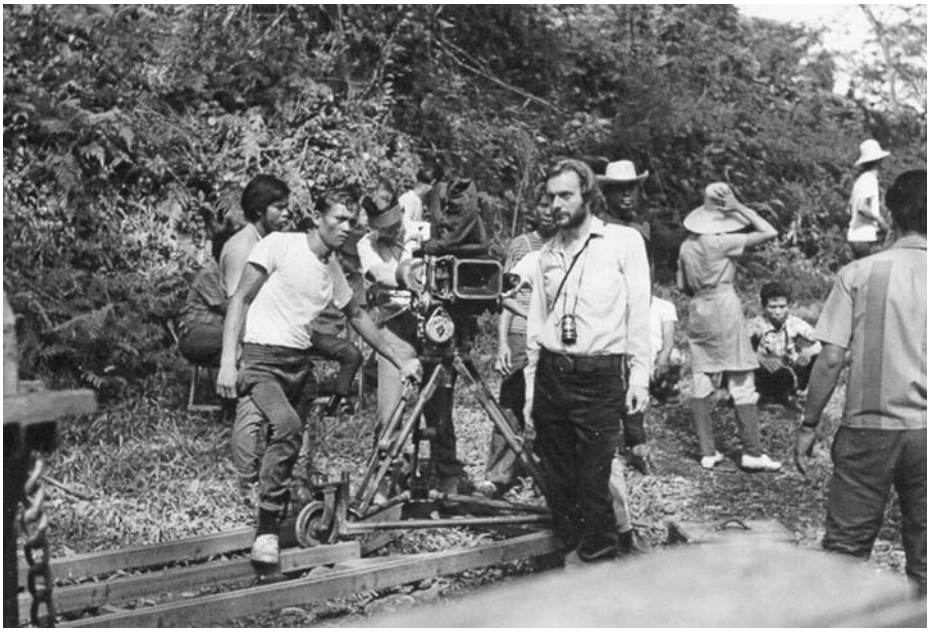
The corruption is not just limited to this mysterious nation. Sleaze and violence also flows through the prison itself—as evidenced by in the movie's tyrannical guard Lucian (played with devilish aplomb by Kathryn Loder, one of the genre's most attractive female heavies), who tortures the female prisoners to near death in order to satisfy her own perversions. The inmates also have a twisted hierarchy amongst themselves—perhaps best highlighted by Grear, who "chooses" the new girl Collier as her sexual partner the minute she walks into the cell. "I can take care of you," states Grear—making the decision for her. "Now you're just property. How'd you like it?" snipes one of the ladies to Collier later. One of the saving graces of the movie: Grier is a standout in the feature, with genuine presence and a badass persona that feels entirely natural. Corman himself says her star-making role in *The Big Doll House* came about by accident:

> She was actually behind a desk at AIP and both Jack and I had seen her there. I actually have to give Jack credit for this—we jointly decided on her and gave her the second lead in the first picture and then upped her to the lead in the later films because the audience responded so well to her. So, although we were both jointly responsible for starting her career, I do have to give primary credit to Jack.

The thing that stops *The Big Doll House* from being offensively sleazy is its sheer stupidity. Obviously unable to take the scenario seriously, Hill throws in all sorts of ridiculous moments—including the girls passing time by racing cockroaches and the token shower room shenanigans. Perhaps best of all is Grear's speech in regards to her sexuality, where she intones: "All men are filthy, all they want to do is get at you." This conclusion is certainly true as far as Sid Haig (in a welcome cameo appearance) is concerned. Playing Harry, a perverted fruit delivery man who comes by the prison with his moronic colleague Fred (Jerry Frank), Haig is permitted to fondle Pam Grier's eye-opening chest so that she can get some smack for Harrad, her other prison girlfriend. In perhaps the film's most bizarre scene, Hill stages what might be the first-ever male rape onscreen. Fred is cornered by Alcott, who holds a knife to his crotch and growls, "Get it up or I'll cut it off." His options limited, he proceeds to mount her—although he seems less than thrilled by the opportunity.

Naturally, the T&A element is sky high. The girls sleep topless (naturally) and all they really appear to care about is getting a good lay. "More than anything else, I miss having a man," groans Alcott—who is impeccably well-groomed, as are all of these "hard done by" prisoners. Moreover, the girls' "hard labor" amounts to randomly digging in the dirty prison grounds (for what we are never told) and, when the time suits them, having a wrestling match in the mud. Security seems to be nonexistent to the point where it is a surprise that the girls just don't take off into the vast fields that surround the establishment.

Even the film's mandatory torture sequences vary in sleaze quality and, in



Jack Hill, at right of camera, works on *The Big Doll House* in the Philippines (1971).

at least one instance, enter into the realm of absurdity. Initially, scenes where the girls undergo water torture and/or brutal whippings are quite unpleasant to watch, but when Loder's barbaric prison warden unveils a machine that dangles a deadly cobra ever closer to an immobilized naked girl, the end result is merely hilarious. Furthermore, Loder is given such lines as, "You will come as painfully close to death and still recover"—making her every bit the comic book villain and giving the film such a bizarre, ludicrous atmosphere that any potential misogyny is quickly forgotten. Consequently, the best argument one can give in regards to the surface offensiveness of Hill's movie is simply to say that no one really seems to be hurt or traumatized by what happens to them. Even after undergoing electrocution, Alcott is soon back out in the fields, fighting with Grear in the mud and planning a way to break out of prison (in order to get laid, of course). As a result, Hill has managed to craft a silly, but entertaining, slice of tawdry exploitation—with the obvious focus being on scoring some ticket sales through the abundant shots of his female cast *sans* clothing. It will probably come as no surprise to anyone that the original trailer managed to cram almost every scene of nudity into a two-minute running time. Talk about knowing your audience...

Aside from Alcott's rape of a man, *The Big Doll House* does merit some interest in regards to Grear's sexuality. A beautiful, black, feminine lesbian was probably pushing some boundaries back in 1971 but Hill seems to treat her

homosexuality with a hint of abnormality. "Pretty soon a girl gets strange desires and it creeps on you like a disease, but it's cure-able" she states to Harry. "What does it take?" he asks. "A real man like you," replies Grear. Although these lines are used in the context of Pam Grier attempting to seduce her male counterpart for her own benefit, the use of words such as "strange" and "a disease" to describe her sexuality are obviously ripe for criticism and leave a bad taste in the mouth. Of course we can write this sort of dialogue off as being part of a less politically correct time, but for Hill — who was always color-blind in his casting decisions and who would become heralded for the strength that he would give his female characters in later films such as *Coffy* — this remains disappointing. While Grear is shown, in the movie, to have a sexual interest in women, her dialogue does seem to indicate that it is part of her long stay in prison — whereas her earlier comment "All men are filthy, all they want to do is get at you" may indicate a hatred for men and an abusive past. As such, the film appears to point out that Grear's lesbianism is a choice — obviously an outdated notion and something that can hardly be defended. While the movie probably does not warrant accusations of homophobia — after all, Hill does not make lesbianism appear unnatural on screen — the feeling that this movie is from a very different time period could not be any clearer.

Nonetheless, one thing that can be said about *The Big Doll House* is that, while it may not be any sort of classic, it is a lot of fun to watch. As with all of the films that he made for Corman, Hill takes a tiny budget and manages to shoot a technically impressive little yarn. The cinematography and editing are fluid throughout the picture and the viewer is never left to feel that the person calling the shots is incapable of bigger and better things. Moreover, on at least one occasion the movie does touch a nerve — that being when a dead prisoner is cremated and Hill tightly focuses his camera on the chimney that blasts out the blackened ashes. In this brief moment the very real horrors of Auschwitz and Buchenwald spring to mind. Producer Jane Schaffer also insists that Hill took the task of directing his first women-in-prison film with some degree of seriousness:

> Jack knew a great deal about World War II in the Pacific and was confident, for instance, in choosing the right pistols and weapons that the Japanese may have left in the Philippines. He also knew a lot about set construction, possibly learned from his dad, and he kept his zest for this production throughout. He loved Sid Haig, of course, and liked his cast pretty well. He enjoyed working with the girls although he thought some of them were pretty hopeless — but he and Sid made the most of their female company. The girls were wined and dined by locals who sent flowers, gifts, coke... They all had fun and Pam Grier was also friendly to everybody. She was low-key, very likable — she knew her lines and always found her mark. Believe me, it was all low-maintenance in those days for our divas but I would say she was more focused than many of the other actresses.

Indeed, when one considers that future Oscar winner Jonathan Demme started out making women-in-prison movies, it is well worth noting that Hill's

attempts at the genre are distinctly better acted, looking and paced, even if Corman feels otherwise, as he stated in an interview:

> *Caged Heat* was a tamer film and it didn't do quite as well *as The Big Doll House* and some of the others but it was a better film because Jonathan got more involved with the characters and I think it was that sensitivity on his part that enabled him to move onto bigger and better films.

As a result, one cannot help but feel that Hill may not have found his niche in the sexploitation genre and, instead, felt more comfortable trying to make a joke out of the film's scenario (he even nods his head to the disastrous experience he had on *Ich, ein Groupie* by naming one villainous character "Dietrich"). In a sense, it is easy to understand why the director saw this as a film that he could play for laughs. After all, beautiful women in prison, letting men fondle their breasts in exchange for drugs and planning a breakout when they aren't wrestling each other in mud or betting on cockroach races ... it is nothing less than preposterous. Yet so is the basis for *Ilsa* (busty Nazi camp commandant castrates the Jewish prisoners that can't sexually satisfy her) and yet director Don Edmonds opted to craft a horrible, repulsive — and straight-faced — picture out of that. So who knows where *The Big Doll House* would have gone if Hill had decided to use the premise to make something nightmarish, sadistic and unrelentingly violent.

One thing is for sure, however, it probably would not be the deviant, and daft, little opus that exploitation fans know and love today.

Jack Hill's memories of *The Big Doll House*

How long did you spend in the Philippines shooting *The Big Doll H*ouse?

It was around three months. We were there over Christmas and I think we left to go out there in November.

Do you remember how long you spent location scouting?

It is hard to say because scouting locations was kind of interspersed with other things but it certainly took several weeks and I didn't do it every day. A lot of my time was spent working on the script and in casting and then I got really sick and that put me out for a while.

Did you build the prison that we see in the film?

Yes and no, the interiors were on a stage.

Was that in the Philippines?

Right. We had a studio there and we built the interiors on that. But the exteriors were an actual prison which was no longer being used. It was full of squatters [*laughs*].

How was the movie pitched to you?

What happened was that when Roger started his company, New World

The recently deceased Roberta Collins and Jack Hill in happier times, on Manila Bay in 1970.

Pictures, he was in partnership with a guy called Barney Woolner, and Barney's wife was very active in it too. They told me about this idea — basically they wanted to do a spinoff on a film called *99 Women* which they believed showed that there was an audience for this sort of thing. But they believed that they could do something better.

Had you seen *99 Women*?

No, I hadn't seen it at the time. *99 Women* came and went, did fairly well, but when I eventually saw it I felt it was very grim. It didn't catch on the way subsequent films did. But when they first started New World Pictures, this sort of film was one of the first things they wanted to do. Now, coincidentally, I learned of someone who had written a women-in-prison script — it was a guy whose name I cannot remember and who didn't end up being credited on the picture. Well, I thought it was a very clever script and so I took it to Roger and we made a deal to make this movie. However, Roger had to fly off to Ireland and I went to Switzerland to do *Ich, ein Groupie*. I was supposed to go to the Philippines right after that.

Did you never want to write the script yourself?

Well, when they told me that they wanted to do a movie on that subject, I just coincidentally came across this guy who had a script, so it all happened

very quickly. It was a great title—*The Big Doll House*—and a very fine script. I don't think this script ever got used, though. I had heard at the time that Jonathan Demme might have used some of it for *Caged Heat* but I don't know that for sure—I never saw his film. This guy called John Ashley came up and he was in partnership with a group called Four Associates and one of the guys involved with that was Eddie Romero.

Was that the exploitation director Eddie Romero?

Yeah, he was there—he was one of the associates. A good guy, actually, and this partnership was what supplied all of the production facilities in the Philippines. Now, originally, there was no plan to film out there—in fact, I got a huge shock when I came back from Switzerland and found that out [*laughs*].

Did Roger come to the set in the Philippines?

Yes, I understand that he did. But while I was away in Switzerland, and Roger was overseas, somehow Stephanie Rothman got brought into the company—along with her husband—to run things while he was in Ireland. Well, they got together with Barney Woolner and his wife and basically steamrolled over everyone. She had done one movie that was pretty successful, *Student Nurses*, and they wanted to take over everything. In the first meeting I had with them, they basically tried to make it impossible for me to do anything.

The movie has a scene of female-on-male rape.

Yeah, I thought that was quite funny and it got a great laugh in the cinema.

Did you see it as being subversive?

Subversive? No, I was just trying to be funny.

But it is quite subversive isn't it? The idea of a gender reversal like that?

Subversive? I wouldn't use that word.

What word would you use?

I would say it was fun [*laughs*]. It was entertaining. I used this one line that used to always bring down the house—"Get it up or I'll cut it off." It brought down the house every time.

This was the first time you worked with Pam Grier.

She was just one of many actors—it was an ensemble cast of several girls and I just put the word out among a number of agents that I was looking for actresses that had potential. The part was not written for a black girl at all, but I was reading black and Asian actresses and she had never done anything before except for a walk-on part in a Russ Meyer movie. And it was so small. I watched the movie [*Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*] and I couldn't even see her. I thought that [she had] presence and authority and so I took a chance with her.

You've got snakes in *The Big Doll House*. Was it scary to have to work with cobras?

We had someone to handle the snakes. In fact, we had a guy that had been bitten by cobras so many times that he was immune to the venom!

One of your actresses gets a snake dropped on her head. Was she happy to do that?

When we did the scene where the snake was hanging over the girl, we had a sheet of plastic between her and the snake.

So she never had to touch them?

No, but they were deadly — they were cobras!

Sounds horrible.

Well, believe me; the actress wouldn't have done it if we hadn't put a sheet of plastic over her. If you watch *Dr. No* there's a scene with a tarantula [on Sean Connery] and it was actually on a sheet of plastic and he moves a little bit and it shifts ... that is because it was on a sheet of plastic. [Connery] didn't want any tarantulas crawling on him.

Did you use many native Philippine actors in the film?

We used as many as we could get away with for the minor parts. We had one American actor that lived in the Philippines and we used him too.

What was it like shooting out in the jungle?

We had hurricanes and typhoons that blew the roof off the soundstage and stripped the jungle where we were going to shoot — things like that happened.

Is that a big fake moustache on Sid Haig in *The Big Doll House*?

No, no, he grew his own moustache.

That is one hell of a moustache!

Yeah, I guess it is [*laughs*].

Pam Grier talks about her lesbianism in the movie in very politically incorrect terms — for instance, she talks about it being a disease.

Yeah, I know, but I couldn't re-write the whole script. I shot quite a bit of what they had written and I didn't care much for that either but there is only so much you can do...

So that isn't one of your lines?

No, it is definitely not one of my lines [*laughs*].

What about that final, dubbed-in line on the current DVD release? You pick up Judith Brown in a car and then we hear you tell her that she is going back to jail, although the line has obviously been put in there in post-production.

Yeah, I don't know about that. It is me in the car, though, you're right [*laughs*]. I guess it must have been put in there for foreign release because it was not in the original theatrical release in the States. It might have been put in for the video release but I don't think so. I mean, the film was banned in a lot of countries and I think in a lot of countries you couldn't show someone getting away with a crime — they had to be caught and punished at the end. It was actually like that in the States as well up until the '60s or something.

It sounds as if it is you that says that line — "We've been looking all over for you."

No, that is not me.

And yet it sounds identical to your voice.

Ah — well I have no recollection of ever recording it. It must just be someone that sounds like me. Does my mouth move?

No, it is definitely over-dubbed.

Well, it must just be someone who sounds like me. I really don't think I would ever have recorded that stupid line.

Let's talk about misogyny. There are three torture sequences involving semi-naked women. You were opening yourself up for criticisms of misogyny.

Well, that is one of the reasons that [the movie] got banned although it was quite commonplace to have violence against men so why should it be different?

I guess it would be because the audience for *The Big Doll House* would be overwhelmingly male. So you could be seen as pandering to a very male desire to see women dominated and tortured.

Oh, women love that movie...

Although you surely have to admit that it is aimed at men?

Yeah, although it got included in an article in a feminist publication who said my two women-in-prison films were a metaphor about women in society.

Do you agree?

Well, I don't disagree but I never had any such idea in mind.

Did you ever think that showing a woman being strung up and whipped while almost naked might sexually excite sections of the male audience?

I don't know. I can't speak for other people. It wasn't a turn-on for me [*laughs*]. I was just trying to do the job I was hired for and tried to make it as interesting as I could. But you may notice that I did something which was actually very authentic. To avoid being bloody, I had her doing it with a wet towel

so it would leave no marks. In the Philippines they told me that was an authentic punishment — they would do that to people but it didn't leave any marks. I thought that was a better idea because I didn't want the characters to be bloodied up. The sound effects make it sound worse.

The girls all seem to be fine in the next scene.

[*Laughs*] Well, I think the humor that it was placed against worked — otherwise you were just going to get turned off. There is a very fine line when you are having violence and humor — you have to be careful about that. But you have to remember that *The Big Doll House* was not something that I really wanted to do. I was desperate and I just tried to do the best with the assignment that I could. I could not come back with it without the sex and violence they wanted so I tried to make it palatable by making it humorous and not graphically bloody.

Then there is the women fighting in the mud. It is like softcore pornography, really.

That was Barney Woolner. He was absolutely insistent that there be a scene where women fight in the mud. Barney was a real bottom feeder type of producer. So I said, "Okay, I will do a fighting-in-the-mud scene" but I tried to make it funny. I mean, girls fighting in the mud is funny [*laughs*]. They used to have mud wrestling girls in America. It was a popular sport, but I can't tell you what the appeal is [*laughs*] — it was very mysterious.

***The Big Doll House* gave birth to the women-in-cages genre. Is that something you're proud of?**

[*Laughs*] It didn't do me any good career-wise because I didn't really know how to play the game. I mean, it *almost* did: When *The Big Doll House* came out, I got an agent that got me a deal with James Aubrey, who was the head of MGM at the time. I just walked in and I gave him a very, very brief pitch on the movie that I wanted to do and he said, "That's great, let's do it" so I thought that I was all set. But I was already contracted with to do a sequel to *The Big Doll House*, which became *The Big Bird Cage*, so I left it with my agent and all he had to do was make the deal. I went off to spend a couple of months on a Greek island with a girl from Berlin — this 18-year-old redhead — and I was supposed to be working on the script for *The Big Bird Cage*, but I guess I didn't get much done on it [*laughs*]. So by the time I got back, to my disdain, I found out that he [the agent] had told them that what they wanted to offer me was not enough. He thought that they would call him back and they didn't. So he called them back and they said, "We're not interested in that anymore." So, basically, an agent lost the job for me, which probably turned out better in the long run.

Judith Brown's memories of *The Big Doll House*

You had done a lot of television work prior to *The Big Doll House*. Can you tell me how this led to your involvement with Roger Corman and Jack Hill?

I was doing bits on television shows, such as *Ironside*, and just before *The Big Doll House* I had done a movie in Denmark called *Threesome* and it was very controversial here in the United States because it had a lesbian theme. I won a Golden Globe award for Most Promising Actress because of *Threesome* — it was a Danish-American film production — and that opened me up to the possibility for more adventures. So when *The Big Doll House* came along, for me it was the natural thing to do — we were trailblazing over in the Philippines and I was thrilled! I was thrilled to be able to work and to see the world at the same time — what a fabulous thing to do. I love my work and I love to travel so there you have it. The reason that I did the movie was because I love to travel and I love adventure.

In 1970, not a lot of people had gone to the Philippines. Did you have no hesitation at all in signing up to this movie?

[*Laughs*] In 1970, not much was intimidating for me. Now I know better but back then, no, I could not wait. In fact, it was the most exciting thing ever for me and I was not intimidated at all. I was thrilled at the opportunity to see another culture and a different part of the world, far away from where I had lived and grown up. I had graduated from college and I thought of it as continuing my education to a higher degree.

What were your thoughts when you got there and you were taken out to the sets in the jungle?

I was shocked but not for one minute did I not appreciate the opportunity I had. I didn't take any of it for granted. When we first came into Manila, there were lots of beggars on the road and blind people being led around by their children. It made a huge impression and influenced me for the rest of my life — as the whole experience did. It was better than any university that I got a degree from and I have a master's degree. It was like getting a doctorate in culture and in life.

Did the cast bond together?

I would say that most of us bonded. I think at one point Roger Corman didn't pay the bills and we all got locked out of our hotels [*laughs*]. It was midnight — you see, this was a non-union picture — and when we came back from filming, we found that they had bolted our doors shut. There we were, after 15 hours of working in the jungle, and we were exhausted beyond belief but we could not get into our rooms. That was quite an experience. But I got into my room eventually. I said to the guy, "Let me go in just so I can get my birth control pills. After all, you wouldn't want to be responsible for my getting pregnant,

would you? Please, I need to get them." So this young guy was talked into it, he opened the door and I wouldn't let him back in. I think Brooke and Roberta got in there with me. We wouldn't come out [*laughs*].

What were your thoughts when you first got to read the script?

I thought it was going to be great fun and I took it very seriously. I took it all seriously. It was not a goof at the time and we had a blast. I mean, it was wonderful—can you imagine the adventure? We went into a women's prison and filmed just outside Manila where people were still staying. It was funky and coming from America in 1970 to see that was just unbelievable—you cannot imagine what an eye-opener that was to a young girl.

How did you feel about the scene where you got your head flushed down the toilet?

Well, I am a method actress so it was just horrendous [*laughs*]. I took it totally serious. When I see it now, I think "Oh my God" but at the time it was just how it looked. It was not a goof back then. Now it is, but when they did that to me back then, I thought it was quite heavy and it shows.

Did you have much interaction with Roger Corman?

No, I always had very little contact with him.

How was Jack Hill back then?

He was great, just the sweetest guy—a little nervous but just a fantastic guy. He was under a lot of pressure on that film and his girlfriend, Jane Schaffer, was the producer on that movie. They were living together over in the Philippines while we were shooting and I think that him having to handle all of us girls must have been nerve-wracking. We were all totally irreverent [*laughs*]. I don't know he handled it. He was a saint.

You mentioned that Jack was "nervous." This was a female-driven film so do you think this may have caused some of that "nervousness"?

My recollection, and my whole impression of him, was that he was outnumbered and we were pretty formidable as a group [*laughs*]. However, I thought it was remarkable that he could deal with us in a pretty calm way. He was definitely nervous. He had a huge amount of responsibility over there—no one else was there from Roger's company—and we were not so experienced but he managed to handle us in a gentle, professional way. He would talk things out with us and I never remember him getting angry. We would flirt with him all the time but also listen to him—he reasoned with us, he was patient and I am sure we were pains in the asses but he managed to handle us.

Tell me about the scene where you have a king cobra draped over you.

Oh, that was incredible! It was very scary—again, I thought I was a method actress. They put me under glass, and I am claustrophobic, so I used it all—and I know this sounds ridiculous—but I really was a young, naïve, method

kind of actress. It was under glass, scary but exciting and — of course — at that age I thought I was immortal. It was formidable. The trainer of the cobras was there, he would hold it and it would strike at the glass. I believed it all, used it all and thought it was a great, and exciting, experience. I was a girl from Beverly Hills and at that time I was chomping at the bit to get out of there so, for me, it was the best thing that could have happened to me and it helped me develop as a woman.

What do you remember about Roberta Collins?

She was a bit of a party girl. She was hysterical and funny — but with a heart of gold, and my cohort during the filming. She was as wild as they come, probably the wildest woman I ever knew. I came from a nice Jewish Beverly Hills family that I was thrilled to get away from and I don't even remember Roberta talking about having a family [*laughs*].

Pam Grier?

Pam was more serious than the rest of us. She stayed more to herself. I don't know that she knew she was going to become the star that she became but she was very professional and hung out more with Pat Woodell if I remember. They were the more conservative ones; Roberta and I were more irreverent. But Pam was nice.

What about the film's villain, Kathryn Loder?

She wasn't part of my group — she really stayed to herself. We were the wild, crazy ones and she just stayed away [*laughs*]. She was quiet. To be honest, Christiane Schmidtmer — I had a problem with her. She was the only one though.

How did you find Sid Haig?

Sid was great! He was earthy and cool. I cannot say anything bad about Sid. He was fun, he got us — he was cool around us — a very terrific guy.

Did the fact that you were required to appear nude bother you at all?

No, none of it bothered me. The nudity was a freedom. I was young and I couldn't wait to get away from my roots. I was happy to get away from Beverly Hills. My father was actually from a little coal mining town in Illinois and he used to tell me stories about this little town of 300 and being the only Jewish family there. He hopped on a freight train out to LA and made a fortune in Beverly Hills and I always wanted to do something like that, you know? I wasn't born into poverty like he was. So, for me, being out in the Philippines was a way of getting closer to my father's side of the family. I remember we were having lunch once in the prison and a cockroach walked out of my salad [*laughs*]. But rather than screaming, like most of my friends back home would have, I thought it was the coolest thing. To have been raised with cooks and not even have been allowed in the kitchen — that was like, "Wow, how earthy is this?" I had a different take on it all, I loved it.

Jack Hill with the stars of *The Big Doll House*: Roberta Collins, left, Judith Brown and Brooke Mills (1972).

What do you remember about the film's release?

It opened on Hollywood Boulevard so I went to the opening of it and, thinking how great it was going to be, I invited my Beverly Hills socialite parents and friends. We got into the theatre and people were screaming, yelling and laughing. I was appalled and embarrassed, in front of my family, because I did not realize the crowd that this film would have. First of all, the place was packed with people who could not wait to see this kind of movie. They were totally participatory and I had no idea people were going to be like that—calling out names and all kinds of stuff. I did know how to take that but it was a real awakening to me in regards to the type of film I had done. We were pretty much the first in that women-exploitation movie so no one knew how people would react. To be honest, I think that *The Big Doll House* is more respected now than it was then. I am more recognized now and I think that a whole cult has grown up around it. I mean, my daughter went to the University of Colorado and her roommate was in the class where they were teaching women in history or something like that. Well, they were studying the representation of women in prison and how the public has perceived this over the last century. She told me that they showed *The Big Doll House* [*laughs*]. I remember think-

ing, "I knew this was going to come back and bite me on the ass after I had children." It did — my daughter's boyfriend went and rented the movie and he and his fraternity went crazy over it.

Can you compare the women-in-prison movie you made after *The Big Doll House*, called *Women in Cages*, which was another Corman production, with your time working for Jack?

It was great but we didn't have Jack so it wasn't as much fun. But the people were wonderful, the crews were the same. *Women in Cages* is not really shown much — it is more obscure and harder to find. I would say *The Big Doll House* was like your first boyfriend — it was very exciting, the first film of that kind, and Jack was terrific. He was really working on a shoestring out there.

You didn't end up in Jack's *The Big Bird Cage*. Did you have any hard feelings over that?

Well, I went on to other stuff. It was like a stepping stone for me. I got typecast after *The Big Doll House* but I don't remember being disappointed that I wasn't in *The Big Bird Cage*.

Finally, then, how do you think being in *The Big Doll House* affected your career?

Well, I got my Golden Globe Award in 1971 for *Threesome*, which John Wayne gave to me, and then I did a lot of television and a lot more B-movies. I married a producer, had two children and wanted to be with them. Then I went on and got a masters degree in psychology and after I got divorced I went and worked with people who had schizophrenia. I was in some good movies — I did *Thank God It's Friday*, *The Psychic Killer*, *House Calls*, and I was named in *Music* magazine as being "Queen of the B-movies." Now I have a wonderful life. I have no regrets.

The Big Bird Cage (1972)

Jack Hill: Director-writer

Cast: Pam Grier (Blossom), Anitra Ford (Terry), Candice Roman (Carla), Teda Bracci (Bull Jones), Carol Speed (Mickie), Karen McKevic (Karen), Sid Haig (Django), Marissa Delgado (Rina), Vic Diaz (Rocco), Andy Centenera (Warden Zappa), Rizza Fabian (Lin Tsiang), Subas Herrero (Moreno), Wendy Green (Gertie)

Producers: Jane Schaffer, Cirio H. Santiago, Roger Corman

Plot: Leggy socialite Terry is in the wrong place at the wrong time when she visits the Flame restaurant in a banana republic. Stuck in the middle of a violent heist orchestrated by revolutionary leader Django and his girlfriend Blossom, Terry ends up being kidnapped, dumped in the street and then

apprehended by the police. Because of her troublemaking relationships with top government officials, the law seizes this golden opportunity to get her out of the way while they have her in confinement. Thus, she is sent to a local sugar-making labor camp — the "big bird cage" that the film's title refers to — for her reputed (re: falsified) role in the robbery. Shacked up with a number of different women, all of them overseen by two misogynistic, homosexual guards and a coldhearted warden called Zappa, Terry comes to discover the in-fighting, paranoia and intense brutality of prison life. However, she is soon joined by a surprise cellmate in the form of Blossom, who has voluntarily gotten herself imprisoned so that she can plan a breakout with the help of Django and his group of guerillas.

About the film: "The ones who work in the bird cage are the ones who didn't keep up their quotas in the field or the girls who make trouble... Informers get hurt. Or maybe even killed" — *Carla (Candice Roman)*. After the success of *The Big Doll House*, it was perhaps inevitable that Corman and Hill would embark on a pseudo-sequel. Holding over stars Pam Grier and Sid Haig, and once again shooting in the Philippines, *The Big Bird Cage* is a decidedly less sleazy film than *The Big Doll House*, although its introduction of male-on-female abuse leaves a nastier taste in the mouth. Indeed, *The Big Bird Cage* is a slightly different beast than its predecessor — despite its plethora of similarly toned comical interludes and the presence of Grier in a similar, badass persona. (Both films ALSO begin with the actress singing a song.) Although each film shares the same all-female prison setting, *The Big Doll House*'s kinky torture set pieces — something that would come to define the women-in-prison genre — are surprisingly nonexistent in its follow-up. Even the token female nudity is kept to a minimum this time around; *The Big Bird Cage* has the dubious honor of being the only Grier-Hill collaboration where the actress keeps her top on.

Also returning for this pseudo-sequel was producer Jane Schaffer, who remembers:

> I was not thrilled to be going back to the Philippines for *The Big Bird Cage* but everyone else enjoyed it. However, I decided while I was there that this would be my last job in that field. The travel, adventure, camaraderie and learning were all great, but I was sick to death of low-budget films and I thought I'd never get good at what I was doing anyway. On the other hand, Jack was very happy with the success of *The Big Doll House*. My brother has even told me it was number one at the box office in LA for one week and I remember going to a first public screening of the film and realizing that the audience was 100 percent on our side. They wanted to laugh and applaud and we just gave them something to enjoy with that film.

Given the full writing honors that he was denied on *The Big Doll House*, Hill's second — and last — women-in-prison feature seems to be unsure of what it actually is. The movie starts out as a fairly gritty little action picture which grabs the viewer from the outset, before it gets bogged down in the expected prison-set violence and the inevitable attempt at freedom from the inmates.

This is something of a shame because, in the opening and closing moments of the picture, Hill makes the most of his tropical locale and captures some genuinely scenic, and inspired, shots. On the other hand, the director wastes Pam Grier, who is almost invisible for the first 50 minutes before she makes a grand re-appearance in the plot and promptly steals the show from every actress around her. For instance, making a speech during the girls' lunch break, the recently convicted Grier states that she is now in charge of things—only to be challenged by the imposing looking, and imposingly named, Bull Jones (Teda Bracci). The two begin to fight, and when Bracci uses a certain racial cuss word, our heroine proceeds to kick her butt and state—with ferocious conviction—"That's *Miss* Nigga to you!" We may have to wait for most of *The Big Bird Cage*'s running time for Grier to make her presence felt, but when she does, it is with the most memorable line in the entire film.

Nevertheless, one of the movie's major problems is its tone. At times the film feels as if Hill is playing everything with his tongue firmly in cheek, well aware that all of the mud wrestling and nudity is mandatory for this type of picture and, as a result, it is probably just best to go with it and have a little fun. Such is the case in the fantastic sequence where leggy waif Karen (played by one-shot starlet Karen McKevic) greases herself up with chicken fat in the shower in order to literally slip through the hands of the other prisoners and attack her nemesis Mickie (*Abby* star Carol Speed). The amusing set piece showcases the lighthearted, ridiculous face of an admittedly sleazy genre just perfectly. On the other hand, the sequences where the film's overweight gay prison guards (played by Vic Diaz and Subas Herrero) beat the women are grim and unpleasant—and it makes *The Big Bird Cage* a difficult picture to fully embrace. These problems are not exactly helped by the fact that, when viewed today, the movie is so politically incorrect that it appears every bit as dated as Pam Grier's flares.

For example, the film's two aforementioned homosexual guards—who actively hate women—are so preposterously over-the-top that it is entirely likely that modern viewers will have to pick their jaws up from the floor. The two actors are required to sport limp wrists and high voices throughout the movie, while their sexuality is used for pure comedy value and treated with no respect whatsoever. As one critic notes, "Psychosexually, the movie uses the guards as eunuchs, appeasing the straight male audience that kept the genre afloat."[4] Is this, however, really acceptable? Didn't the best films, and filmmakers, of the late '60s and early '70s gain their reputations through breaking down such prejudices? John Schlesinger's classic twosome of 1969's *Midnight Cowboy* and 1971's *Sunday Bloody Sunday* demonstrate that homosexuality was being maturely addressed in mainstream cinema at the time. Moreover, lest we use the old "it's only an exploitation movie" argument, let it be known that Italy's purveyor of violent horror titles, Dario Argento, was happy to feature gay characters in his masterworks *Cat o' Nine Tails* (1971), *Four Flies on Grey Velvet*

(also '71) and *Deep Red* (1975). Thus, Hill shows a comparatively regressive attitude towards gay men in *The Big Bird Cage*— and it is nothing to be proud of.

Indeed, when it is discovered that Warden Zappa likes female company, one of the prisoners comments, "It's good to know that at least one man around here is *naturally inclined*." This is not the sort of "comical" aside that one can imagine being deemed acceptable in today's more politically correct atmosphere — and rightfully so. Then there is the lengthy sequence in which Sid Haig's jungle-based freedom fighter Django attempts to attract the fancy of Diaz so that he can be brought into the prison as a warden. Believe it or not, the latter actually follows his new fancy into the lavatory and watches him urinate in order to show his interest. This is hardly the most positive picture of homosexual bonding. Still, the "hilarity" continues when, at the end of the movie, *The Big Bird Cage* features another female-on-male rape scene — whereby the perpetually horny girls decide to use Diaz for sex (as opposed to completing their prison break). "You're finally going to use that thing for what it was made for," states one of the ladies— seemingly insinuating, once more, that his homosexuality is unnatural.

Some may say that part of what makes the exploitation cinema of yesteryear so appealing to many is that — devoid of many of the boundaries that are in place today — these films seemingly reveled in bad taste and breaking taboos. This, of course, applies greatly to the women-in-prison genre and is, surely, part of the reason why contemporary thrill-seekers continue to watch movies such as *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* and *Sadomania*— whose sole interest lies in seeing just how far bad taste can be pushed. While *The Big Bird Cage* does feature homosexual clichés, it should perhaps also be mentioned that the film doesn't really restrain itself in regards to stereotyping *any* character. Hence, we have the blonde bimbo-nymphomaniac (well played by Candice Roman), the slutty socialite, the lazy revolutionary (whose real goal seems to be financial wealth) and the general inhumanity of a third world prison. This does not, of course, make the limp wrists and women-beating escapades of the movie's two gay guards any more palatable or acceptable but it does indicate that their excessive characteristics are part of the package for *The Big Bird Cage*. Ultimately, this may be Hill's undoing: Everything in the feature is so heavy-handed and over-the-top that it becomes challenging to really get involved with the action.

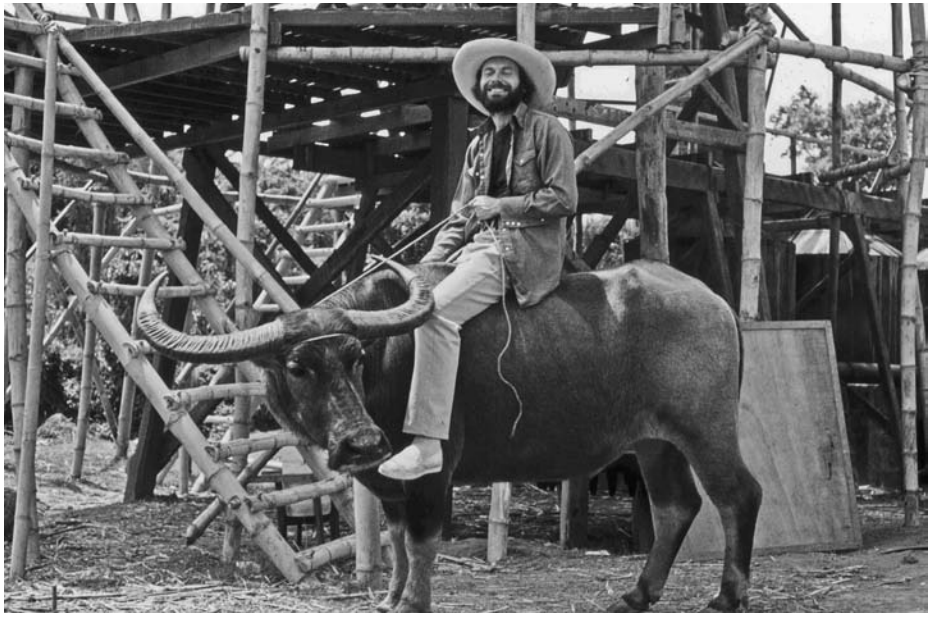
Nevertheless, as was the case with *The Big Doll House*, the director at least attempts to have his female characters appear tough in the face of adversity and violence. As might be expected, Pam Grier presents herself as a true leader, especially in comparison to the feeble, reactionary male figures who are in charge of the prison. While Grier overshadows the rest of her co-stars, Anitra Ford's upper-class "it girl" Terry handles also herself well, coming to the rescue of a woman, who is not handling incarceration well at all, and even masterminding a prison break of her own (which results in an attempted gang rape when

she, inadvertently, seeks help in the wrong place). Even Candice Roman's perpetually horny Carla can handle a firearm and doesn't think twice about using portly guard Vic Diaz for her own sexual pleasure. Hence, when the prison catches fire and the inevitable gunfire begins, some of the girls hold the guard down — with Carla sitting on Diaz's face and forcing the man to pleasure her orally.

Considering that the abusive, authoritarian monster has been shown throughout the movie inflicting violence on the captive women, it is strangely subversive to see one of the previously terrified females empower herself through gaining sexual release via the humiliation of her male tormentor. Were this done with a gender reversal, it would, of course, have to constitute a man-on-woman rape, and it would no doubt be distinctly unpleasant to watch. Yet Hill — through the orgasm of Carla and the resulting degradation of Diaz's warden — creates something akin to female domination. Especially since behind Carla we see a line of women waiting to further "rape" the guard — not so much a comment on forcing him into a heterosexual relation as much as it is about incarcerated females given the opportunity to have intercourse with a male. Considering that the women-in-prison film would soon degenerate into sexual violence directed towards females, it is (within the confines of its own tawdry genre) quite unorthodox to see the sort of female-on-male dominance that, at least fleetingly, comes to the surface in both *The Big Doll House* and *The Big Bird Cage*.

Then there is the bird cage itself — a quite remarkable contraption that makes the prisoners' incarceration so much more believable. Whereas *The Big Doll House* did not fully convince with its jungle surrounding (there was a constant, nagging feeling that the prisoners could easily escape), here the nightmarish sugar mill, and the sickly-looking physiques of the prisoners who work in the machine's confines, is enough to make the labor camp seem genuinely horrible. While the movie's atmosphere is not quite as grimy as that of *The Big Doll House*, with the actual holding cell looking like the sort of backpacker's hostel that one might encounter in the Australian rain forest, there is more of a feeling of isolation and hopelessness on the part of the prisoners. Again, this may be because of the roughness of the guards and the early image of a prisoner being "accidentally" pushed off the top of the bird cage (not to mention the later sight of another girl having her hands destroyed in the machinery). Such details certainly add to the scummy atmosphere.

Attention also has to be given to one of Sid Haig's finest performances — this time playing a revolutionary who does not appear to actually have any interest in creating a revolution. Instead, the actor's Django character robs a restaurant's rich clientele simply so that he can continue to live his tropical, easygoing life out in the jungle, surrounded by some unquestioning personal militia and his girlfriend. The only reason he decides to instigate a prison break is because one of his guerillas suggests, "What a blow for freedom to liberate



Jack Hill and friend on the set of *The Big Bird Cage* (1972).

all of those young girls." One almost expects Haig to reply, "Sounds cool, man" in response. With his overgrown beard, laid-back lifestyle and casual clothing, Django actually represents more of a hippy than a Che Guevara–type of Marxist freedom fighter. Hill's disdain towards the couch revolutionary would later surface in *The Swinging Cheerleaders*; here Haig's character is presented as little more than a lovable goof — albeit, whether intentional or not, engaged in an interracial relationship that was not entirely common to see on the screen back in 1972. While Hill's colorblind decision to cast black actors and actresses in pivotal roles — during a time when the blaxploitation craze was still finding its feet — is admirable, it should be noted that *The Big Bird Cage* is the only film of his wherein a white character enjoys a lengthy, passionate kiss with a black female. Strangely, the unlikely coupling of the skinny ruffian Haig and the statuesque, model-like Grier displays some chemistry — which may indicate how underrated both performers actually are.

The Big Bird Cage also represented the last of four straight films on which Jane Schaffer worked with her then-boyfriend Hill. It also remains her last credit in the film industry. She speaks highly of the director's abilities:

> My feelings about exploitation films were mixed. Sex films were the first rung on the ladder for so many at that time. My sense was that everybody was having fun and glad to have a job. On the Philippine films I personally felt that you could see the recent cultural shift toward feminism — although it was very different over in the established studios. Jack admired bold women and was not personally sexist at

all. I always appreciated his creativity and skills, and was only annoyed that he wouldn't compete with his Coppola-type peers in creating an oeuvre that I could boast about. But he loved B-movies, theatricality and swashbuckling. I guess he had that gene; his father was a set designer for Disney and his brother became a professional magician.

Although the low-budget *The Big Bird Cage* does not represent the best of the women-in-prison genre (strangely enough, that honor goes to the frankly incredible, Japanese-made *Female Prisoner #701: Scorpion* from 1972), it is very well shot and well acted and has some surprisingly explosive action sequences (including the burning of the title apparatus). Hill's greatest strength, which can also be seen in *The Big Doll House*, is giving us at least a couple of characters to care about in amongst the sleazy necessities that the genre demands (shower scenes, catfights, mud wrestling, screaming women and attempted rape). It is fleetingly hilarious (the scene where Haig pulls a fish out of his pants after apparently spending an entire night swimming up river is priceless) and, yet, also horribly un–PC and uncharacteristically serious whenever an act of violence takes place. This split personality is, unfortunately, what stops the movie from being constantly entertaining. Still, as the end credits roll, it is difficult to feel too cheated by *The Big Bird Cage*. With engaging actors, a sense of its own absurdity and a story that moves from A to B without any notable problems, the picture remains far better that it has any right to be. In comparison to the best of Hill's work, however, it is still decidedly second-tier.

Jack Hill's Memories of *The Big Bird Cage*

***The Big Bird Cage* avoids the prolonged torture sequences of *The Big Doll House*— why is this?**

Well, for one thing, there had been so many imitations— other people rushing other movies out, including Stephanie Rothman. She and Barney Woolner went off on their own and created a company called Dimension Films and they produced a clone of *The Big Doll House* called *Sweet Sugar* and it was basically all of the same characters and everything ... now, that is a sure way to make sure you flop. It was a total bomb and the company went under shortly afterwards. What I wanted to do was to get away from the genre because there had been one imitation after another. So I tried to do it differently — I mean, that is just my way of working. We did do one sequence with Pam Grier though — where they snap her fingers. They actually told me that is the way that they torture prisoners out there. You know, the guy puts the cartridges between her knuckles and squeezes the fingers together. It won't do any damage unless you overdo it but it is very painful. It doesn't leave any marks. That is totally authentic.

You wrote *The Big Bird Cage*. Where did the idea come from?

From the title, mainly. I just thought of it as a title and then went from

there. It was actually a functioning thing—there was no such thing but it did actually work for the film.

In neither *The Big Doll House* nor *The Big Bird Cage* do you mention where the action is set. Was this on purpose?

Yeah, that was because the films were a total fantasy and I wanted to make it look like they could be South America but in actual fact it doesn't matter where it was.

Although Sid Haig as a revolutionary, with a guerilla force behind him, made me think that *The Big Bird Cage* was supposed to be set in Bolivia.

No, my intention was to have it not matter where it was—just to make it look like a tropical picture. I didn't want to pin it down anywhere, mainly so that the audience wouldn't care where it was.

Why are the two prison guards these misogynistic, overly camp, gay men?

I just wanted to spoof the whole genre and, for better or worse, right or wrong, that is what I came up with. I tried to make it funny.

When viewed today, do you think it comes across as being homophobic?

I don't think so.

Did the two actors, Vic Diaz and Subas Herrero, have any issues with camping it up?

Well, no, they had a great time with it. The only qualm I think Vic had was whether anyone would think he was gay watching the movie but to answer your question in regards to homophobia, the movie had its longest run at a gay theatre in Hollywood. A lot of people thought it would offend the gay community so there you go.

The sight of men beating up women in *The Big Bird Cage* makes me quite uncomfortable.

You know, I still see that all the time. I walk out of it, in fact. I went to a screening of *Once Were Warriors* at a film festival which I was invited to in Sweden and when the guy in that movie started beating up his wife, I stood up and walked out. Now I was asked, "Why did you do that when you have so much violence in your movies?" I say, "I'm not the same person as I was then." [*Laughs*] I don't mind if someone shows it. I just don't want to see it, that's all. But *The Big Bird Cage* never had anything that graphic...

Vic Diaz said in an interview that he nearly passed out when one of the girls sat on his face at the end of the movie.[5]

He nearly passed out? Oh, he is just being funny—I don't remember anything like that. I think he was just pulling someone's leg. He has a very bizarre sense of humor.

How did you find Vic Diaz as an actor?

Vic was a fine person and as an actor I thought he was very good.

How were the Philippine actors to work with?

The Philippine actors have a different kind of discipline from Hollywood actors. I could never schedule the first set-up in the morning because they would always be late, Vic included. But that is just the way it is in the Philippines, the director usually doesn't show up until ten in the morning. They don't think it matters, whereas in Hollywood we always start on time. They have a hard time understanding that.

Let's talk about another un–PC moment — the sequence where Anitra Ford asks Sid Haig, after he kidnaps her, "What are you planning to do?" and he says, "I'm going to rape you" to which she responds, "Well, you can't because I enjoy sex."

Oh, I've been criticized a lot over that one [*laughs*]. So was the actress. I just thought it was a joke — the actress was teasing him ... you know? But you see things change — the times have changed since then. Back when the movie came out, that just got a big laugh but, later, with political correctness, things are different.

What were the challenges of burning down the entire "bird cage" at the end of the movie?

We knew when we built it that we were going to burn it up. So we just shot everything else and then lit it on fire. My father built that, by the way. It's funny — it was supposed to collapse but it failed to do that.

***The Big Bird Cage* is the only Jack Hill film in which Pam Grier does not appear nude. Your reason?**

Uh ... I don't know. I don't think it really mattered to me [*laughs*].

She doesn't really come into the movie until 50 minutes in. Why did you not use more of her?

That is just the way I wrote the story. I didn't write the film to keep her in the movie. I didn't have any reason for kicking her out but the film started in a different direction.

Was it easy enough to cast Pam Grier again in *The Big Bird Cage* or did you have to push for her?

I didn't have to do anything — she practically stole the show in the previous one so I had no problem with her being in it. She and some of the other actresses stayed on in the Philippines and did several other films there in the meantime.

Is either *The Big Doll House* or *The Big Bird Cage* making a political statement on the prison conditions in third world countries?

No, I never had any intention of making political statements with these films. I was just looking for what might be a good yarn.

Taken as a whole, the film is less violent than *The Big Doll House*.

Yeah, like I said, there had been so many imitators in-between that audiences were getting tired of the subject matter. It could be that it wasn't violent enough — but the general impression was that the genre was running out of ideas.

Did *you* plan Pam Grier's song and dance at the start or was it something she, or the producers, wanted her to do after singing "Long Time Woman" in *The Big Doll House*?

I recall that Pam and Sid worked out the song in *The Big Bird Cage* themselves, but the idea that they should have an act together was mine alone. Of course, the fact that I knew she could sing had a lot to do with it.

You know, Sid Haig plays a pretty rubbish revolutionary in the film — he's more like a hippy...

Yeah, I just thought it was funny. On the other hand — anything that can be the butt of humor is fair game in my book. I think my comic venom — if you want to call it that — was directed equally toward authority figures — wouldn't you say? Not much difference, as it were....

Did you see any of the films that followed on the coattails of your women-in-prison movies?

No, I never saw any of the other movies.

You never saw *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS*?

No, I have never seen the *Ilsa* movies. I know the title and a little about them, but I've never seen them. I wouldn't even know if *The Big Doll House* set that template down...

Finally, was Roger Corman happy with the movie?

Yeah, they were very happy with the movie.

And did he have any problems with the humor that you put into these movies? It sort of dilutes the sleaziness.

No, he always liked to have humor in his pictures.

5

The Blaxploitation Years

Coffy (1973)

Jack Hill: Director-writer

Cast: Pam Grier (Coffy), Booker Bradshaw (Howard Brunswick), Robert DoQui (King George), William Elliot (Carter), Allan Arbus (Arturo Vitroni), Sid Haig (Omar), Barry Cahill (McHenry), Lee de Broux (Nick), Ruben Moreno (Ramos), Lisa Farringer (Jeri), Carol Locatell (Priscilla), Linda Haynes (Meg)

Producers: Robert Papazian, Salvatore Billitteri, Samuel Z. Arkoff

Plot: Miss Coffin (no doubt a pun in itself), who prefers to be known as Coffy, is a statuesque African-American who works as a nurse in a busy Los Angeles hospital. In her spare time, she has another vocation — ridding the city streets of the drug pushers who were responsible for her 11-year-old sister's addiction to heroin. Our leading lady wastes little time shotgun-blasting one pusher's head and then forcing his terrified assistant to overdose on a lethal injection of smack. Coffy's ex-boyfriend Carter, a noble cop, insists that the drug problem was created by a more complicated hierarchy, one that even the corrupt Los Angeles police force might be involved with. When Carter, who refuses to become entangled in anything illegal, is bludgeoned into a coma by two home intruders hired by his own department, Coffy goes undercover as a prostitute for the well-known pimp-drug lord King George. Her mission is to seek out and destroy the drug kings of Los Angeles although her biggest challenge comes when she discovers that her current lover, politician Howard Brunswick, is heavily involved with the chemical barons that he publicly condemns.

About the film: "This is the end of your rotten life, you motherfuckin' dope pusher"—*Coffy* (*Pam Grier) just seconds before she blows away a drug dealer*. *Coffy* represented yet another change of direction for Hill with the director going from two back-to-back women-in-prison outings to a female vigilante flick obviously designed to cash-in on the market for blaxploitation that really blossomed after the release of 1971's *Shaft*. While it has been noted that Pam Grier's presence in both *The Big Doll House* and *The Big Bird Cage* ensured "a crossover into blaxploitation"[1] territory, nothing could be further from the

She's the "GODMOTHER" of them all
...The baddest One-Chick Hit-Squad that ever hit town!
"Coffy"
R
Samuel Z. Arkoff presents an American International Picture
"COFFY"
starring
PAM GRIER · BOOKER BRADSHAW · ROBERT DOQUI · WILLIAM ELLIOTT · ALLAN ARBUS as Vitroni · and SID HAIG as Omar
Produced by Robert A. Papazian · Written and Directed by Jack Hill · COLOR by Movielab
73/157
©2004 HeritageComics.com
"COFFY"

The original theatrical poster for *Coffy* (1973).

truth. Certainly, anyone familiar with the blaxploitation genre would know all too well that the main "sell" for this short-lived trend was having a black actor as the central star (and often as the villain too). Grier certainly commands some attention in Hill's previous two pictures but as a second fiddle to the white lead. Indeed, nothing about either *The Big Doll House* or *The Big Bird Cage* (including each film's marketing campaign) was designed to cash-in, or to exploit, the then-unknown Grier's presence. However, following *Coffy* the actress was propelled into a genuine leading lady and became, as has been well-documented, "the first black woman to rise to stardom through B movies."[2]

The first sign of a cinema designed to specifically appeal to an African-American audience was 1970's *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, which made enough of an impact at the box office to lead *Variety* to opine that "even Southern exhibitors will want a piece of the action."[3] However, it was Mario Van Peebles' seminal, not to mention political, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* that really forced mainstream critics to sit up and take notice, raking in "over $4,000,000 in domestic rentals alone"[4] back in 1971. As is so often the case, the major studios were quick to take notice and in the same year MGM released the more suburban-friendly *Shaft*, a crossover hit that would win an Oscar (for Isaac Hayes' famous theme track), spawn two sequels, a television series and even inspire a remake in 2000. Charismatic star Richard Roundtree, whose career would nosedive following his breakthrough smash, earned a Golden Globe award for Most Promising Newcomer. After *Shaft* broke the bank, the blaxploitation genre really kicked into gear, serving up such hits as the race-relations masterpiece *Across 110th Street*, the morally dubious pimp-as-a-hero opus *Superfly*, Fred Williamson's no-nonsense *Hammer* (all from 1972) and the more morally complex *Black Caesar* (1973).

Some points are worth addressing here. The first is that, while many of the above films would address worthy political points (be it the social class difference between races, discrimination in the police force or white, middle-class attitudes towards ethnic minorities), the end result was always male-dominated. Movies such as the aforementioned *Superfly* and its ilk were focused almost entirely on men and, more to the point, men behaving in an overtly masculine manner. Another facet of some of the best-known blaxploitation efforts is the depiction of pimping and drug use as glamourous and/or socially acceptable. This is especially notable in films such as *Superfly*, 1973's *The Mack* and 1975's *Candy Tangerine Man* and *Dolemite*. Viewed today, such movies seem decidedly politically incorrect, casting their storyline pimps as the narrative "heroes," even when they are committing murder, snorting cocaine, working the streets or sleeping with hookers.

Thus, *Coffy* appears to be just as much a reaction *against* the blaxploitation fad as it is a product of it, with Hill drawing out more accepted lines between his "good" characters and his "bad" ones. Moreover, as has been mentioned by the British critic Jonathan Ross, what also makes *Coffy* unique is that

its title character is given "a reason for her violent actions, over and above greed, as in the pimp movies, or employment *à la Shaft*."[5] Certainly, Hill's picture at least tries to make the various violent situations less fantastical, or idealistic, and there is little room in *Coffy* for traditional action heroics. Finally, as a genre, blaxploitation's roots are indelibly rooted in New York — the city that played host to such hits as *Shaft* and *Black Caesar* while even being used as a selling point in the self-explanatory titles *Across 110th Street*, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *Hell Up in Harlem* (1973). However, *Coffy* — as with Hill's subsequent *Foxy Brown* — makes a case for Los Angeles as an equally formidable metropolis to backdrop a vigilante thriller and may have inspired such other West Coast examples of the genre as the aforementioned *Candy Tangerine Man*, *The Mack* and *Truck Turner* (1974).

Coffy begins with an act of incredible violence wherein star Pam Grier takes a shotgun and blows a male drug pusher's head to bits. The sequence is extremely bloody, even rivaling a similar special effect orchestrated by artist Tom Savini for George Romero's classic *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and its impact is immediate. Right away we are made aware that *Coffy* is going to be a gritty and even gruesome experience, allaying any viewer's fear that this damsel will not be able to rival the blood and sweat of *Shaft* or *Superfly*. From here Hill quickly introduces other characters: Coffy's sister, left dependent in a nursing home after her crippling brush with heroin addiction; Carter, the nice guy cop in a corrupt police force; and Howard Brunswick, handsome, smart, careerist — he is our leading lady's boyfriend. He is also planning on running for Congress, albeit with the help and funding of the very drug dealers and gangsters that he claims to want to wipe from the city streets. When Carter is left with brain damage following a beating by two masked intruders (Carter turned down offers to be involved with the city's lucrative trade in illegal drugs), Coffy sets out to avenge the attack — but, unlike when we first meet her and she simply blasts away any old dealer, this time she has a master plan.

Posing as Mystique, a prostitute from Jamaica, Coffy infiltrates the prostitution service provided by King George. Eventually caught in the act of attempting to wipe out George's client, the powerful gangster Arturo Vitroni, Coffy lies to her captors and says that she was put up to it by her "boss," who is brutally killed. (In a scene clearly designed to have the movie's ethnic target audience seeing red; Sid Haig snarls, "This is how we lynch niggers" before tying a rope around the helpless George's neck.) From here, with Coffy captured by Vitroni — and finding out that her seemingly respectable boyfriend's business is tied in with the local drug cartels — the movie turns into a straight-up revenge flick, with Grier seducing, stabbing and shooting her way out of many tight situations. Yet there is more to *Coffy* than its unabashed vigilante horror story and, after the trashy theatrics of *The Big Doll House* and *The Big Bird Cage*, one feels as if Hill is trying to make something a lot more personal. Thus, as with *Pit Stop*, *Coffy* sees the director once again studying a character

who gradually loses her soul as the picture progresses and ends up in a state of wretched loneliness. There is no redemption for Grier's Coffy. While her vigilante actions are never really criticized, we are at least allowed to relate to her, even fleetingly, as an actual human being rather than a Rambo-style executioner. "Carter, did you ever do something when you were mad?" Grier asks her policeman ex-lover. "Really mad," she continues, "and it was like living in a dream?" In other words, *Coffy* is the first blaxploitation movie in which the main character feels as if they have been forced into violence and, even then, is given the opportunity to at least momentarily express doubt or hesitation. While the scenes of Grier blasting seven shades of shit out of her various adversaries are as necessary to the picture's genre, and to putting bums on seats, as the actress's many nude scenes, it should be mentioned that *Coffy* also presents a relatively interesting meditation on the spread of illegal drugs.

For instance, near the beginning of the film, Carter tells Coffy that the average street dealer is "only part of a chain that reaches all the way back to some poor farmer in Turkey or Vietnam." Hill would often be critical of "hippy" characters in his work—from Sid Haig's armchair revolutionary in *The Big Bird Cage* to the stoned, but decadent, campus liberal in *The Swinging Cheerleaders*—and this could, ultimately, be part of the reason why. In this line of dialogue, the filmmakers shows enough awareness to point out that the left-leaning politics of the whole drugged-up "free love" generation were, to some extent, hypocritical in light of the gross exploitation of those who, at the very bottom of the market chain, provided the illegal wares sold on the streets. In *Coffy*, however, the drug trade can also be seen to reflect the director's own negative view of the entire capitalistic form of business. When, for example, Grier first faces up to a drug dealer, she alludes to her ex-addict sister—growling, "Her life is gone ... and you're living real good..." In other words, those gaining riches from the drug trade are doing so without any concern for the consumer they are serving. This is nothing revelatory, of course, but it does fit in well with a later comment from corrupt politician Howard Brunswick (played with the right amount of arrogance and sleaze by Booker Bradshaw): "Black people want dope, and brown people want dope, and as long as people are deprived of a decent life, they'll settle for anything to just plain feel good with." On the surface at least, what Hill appears to be saying is that the very infrastructure that creates social class—namely, our modern economic system—is also what is responsible for the drug trade. Hence, the "people deprived of a good life" (i.e., those without the money to afford one) are the target market for the pushers and, ironically, also the poorly paid farmers in developing countries, creating product to be sold on the streets of wealthy countries.

"Black, green or yellow—I'm in it for the green, the green buck," maintains Brunswick, who later adds, "When there is a need, someone comes along to fill it." Spoken like a product of Nixon's America, Brunswick is not only a corrupt politician but someone whose selfish philosophy (namely "It's all about

Coffy
SAMUEL Z. ARKOFF
AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL PICTURE
COFFY
PAM GRIER • BOOKER BRADSHAW • ROBERT DOQUI • WILLIAM ELLIOTT • ALLAN ARBUS • SID HAIG
ROBERT A. PAPAZIAN
JACK HILL
COLORS DELLA TELECOLOR

An alternate theatrical poster for *Coffy*.

me") foreshadows the Reagan-Thatcher era that was still to come — wherein *any* business venture, providing that it created capital, was encouraged. As such, the supply-and-demand, "forget the morals—*does it make any money*?" ethics of the drug trade are perfectly in sync with what capitalism promotes. By depicting a politician so deeply involved in this, Hill makes a very literal connection between the hierarchy that runs a country (and which depicts the drug trade as the mother of all evils) and yet encourages a capitalistic environment which, by its very nature, needs rich and poor to survive. The two, ultimately, have more in common — and even rely on one another (hence the comment of "as long as people are deprived of a decent life...") and *Coffy* makes this perfectly clear. "It is this vicious combination of big business and government which has kept our sisters prostitutes and our brothers dope pushers," says Brunswick during a televised proclamation in which he feigns sympathy for the ethnic underclass. As with so many politicians, he speaks the truth even when he is the cause of the problem.

Inevitably, the problem with *Coffy*— and most exploitation pictures of this era — is that the film's resolution, at least on the surface, is reached through murder. Nevertheless, Hill is able to taint this with just the right shade of dark humor — as when Grier shoots her lover in the testicles with a shotgun following his liaison with a white woman at the movie's close. It may not be subtle but by literally destroying his manhood, *Coffy* comes full circle in presenting a sexy, and sexual, black woman who is just as formidable as any male action hero of the time. It is also worth mentioning that castration, as a revenge motif, also appears in *Foxy Brown*— possibly indicating some attempt on the part of Hill to reach out to a female audience who might emphasize with Grier's no-nonsense vigilante and who at least had *something* to cheer for should they find themselves pulled along to the picture by a boyfriend. Grier noted that, at a showing of one of her post–*Coffy* pictures, *The Arena*...

> I saw one woman in a 42nd Street theater smack her boyfriend's arm as Pam was icing half the Roman army... The woman said, "See, fool, I'm going to get myself together like her, so next time you think you're superman, watch out."[6]

In light of its leading lady's rampage and onscreen dominance, it would be all too easy to call *Coffy* a feminist picture but this does not really stick. As with *Foxy Brown*, Grier's character is still required to take off her top and, in one instance, sleep with a character she despises in order to further her own cause (revenge). One could certainly argue that having the character of Coffy use sex to her advantage puts her on equal footing with James Bond, but there is still something distinctly uncomfortable about knowing she is sleeping with somebody to avenge the death of her ex-boyfriend. It also confuses her apparent loyalty to her politician beau (who, let us not forget, she wastes little time in shooting after seeing him cheat on her) and succeeds only in making us question the character's realism. As cartoon-like as some of *Foxy Brown* is, it plays

Pam Grier poses for a *Coffy* publicity shot.

a little more fluidly than *Coffy*, thanks to the narrative not asking the character to do anything that doesn't jibe with the morality already established for her.

Coffy's journey to the cinema screen is interesting in itself, being that the picture was rushed out to beat the rival, big-studio opus *Cleopatra Jones* with Tamara Dobson, a spy-spoof that was very much rooted in comic book imagery. It is slightly perverse to note that both films would be helmed by white directors (Jack Starrett took the reins of *Cleopatra Jones*)—something of a norm for the blaxploitation genre after its fiercely personal start under the auspices of Ossie Davis (*Cotton Comes to Harlem*), Melvin Van Peebles (*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*) and Gordon Parks Jr. (*Superfly* and *Three the Hard Way*). Suffice to say that neither *Coffy* nor *Cleopatra Jones* could match these early milestones in regards to feeling as if they genuinely had some kind of radical point behind them — although both are, arguably, more entertaining feature films.

The script for *Cleopatra Jones* had actually attracted the interest of American International Pictures but, when the project found a home at Warner Bros., *Coffy* was quickly hurried into production in order to beat the other female blaxploitation picture into the cinemas (which it did).[7] Watching both films today, *Coffy* holds up far better, perhaps because the title character of *Cleopatra Jones* could just as well be white, yellow or purple given that her ethnicity bears very little relevance. As much fun as the film is, it is perhaps best described as little more than an escapist, female-led James Bond picture. Nevertheless, following the success of *Coffy* and *Cleopatra Jones*, a new sub-genre within the blaxploitation trend opened up — this one allowing African-American actresses to headline features in a genre that had, up until this time, been undeniably macho. *Coffy* also betters most of its competition by featuring a scorching soundtrack from funk-soul legend Roy Ayers. While it was the norm for blaxploitation pictures to highlight a sexy soul score, it is surprising how many of them are forgettable. Along with Curtis Mayfield's "Pusher Man" from *Superfly* and Isaac Hayes' legendary theme for *Shaft*, *Coffy* contains one of the most

memorable soundtracks of the era — partly because of its wonderfully daft lyrics ("Coffy is the color of your skin/ Coffy is the world you live in" croons the title song singer).

Rated as one of Quentin Tarantino's top 12 films of all time,[8] *Coffy* is certainly one of the most gripping examples of the blaxploitation genre. With some intelligent, sharp dialogue and a tremendous performance from Grier, the picture never lags and it is as well paced as any of Hill's work. Well deserving of its reputation as one of the genre's must-see pictures, *Coffy* remains one of its director's best, most layered movies.

Fans of the grindhouse period should also look out for *Rolling Thunder* starlet Linda Haynes in a small role as King George's girlfriend (who ends up getting her hands sliced to ribbons when Coffy hides some razor blades in her Afro prior to a brutally entertaining catfight). Even in this minor role she stands out and, at least temporarily, gives Grier some formidable female opposition.

Jack Hill's Memories of *Coffy*

What was the budget and schedule?

It took 18 days to shoot and the budget was $500,000. They had a limit on what they called "black films" because they thought that at that price they could make a profit on any of them. You see, there were certain audiences that would go and see any blaxploitation movie back then, so the producers wouldn't go over that budget because no blaxploitation film had ever broken over into a more mainstream audience except for ... now what's it called?

Shaft?

Well, that was a major studio film and not what I would say is really a blaxploitation movie. The one I was thinking of was *Superfly. Superfly* had done it. In fact, I remember seeing *Superfly* before I made *Coffy*. I met Ron O'Neal when he came out here [to Los Angeles] to do a stage production of *Macbeth*. I also knew that *Sweet Sweetback* was the first "black" picture — and as soon as that came out, it was an eye-opener and everybody was thinking about doing what was called "black" movies, because there was no such word as "blaxploitation" then. Nobody quite knew what the secret to the success of these films was.

What was your relationship like with Pam Grier back then?

Strictly very professional. She contributed very good ideas on a kind of life that I wasn't that familiar with and we worked together on things that she could do and I would write some of them into the script. I basically based the character on her personality, as I saw it.

***Coffy* launched her as a star and yet *Cleopatra Jones*— which came out shortly afterwards — didn't succeed in making a star out of Tamara Dobson and isn't as fondly remembered. Why do you think this is?**

Well, because *Cleopatra Jones* was pretty much an imitation of a James Bond movie. The character could just as well have been a man. The difference was that with *Coffy* I wanted to create a character who was distinctly feminine and who used femininity as a weapon, but who was not a super-fighter or anything like that. Coffy could have been anybody — the point was that any woman could see herself in there, and she uses her wits and wiles instead of gadgets and technical fighting ability. That was the difference between the two movies.

The legendary Sam Arkoff was an executive producer on *Coffy*, but did he have any influence over the direction of the film?

No. In fact, I actually never had any sessions with him. I just met him a few times.

How would you compare Arkoff to Roger Corman?

Oh, he was very, very different from Roger Corman. I don't actually have any recollections of him other than that he was an affable bear of a guy. I never had any kind of artistic or technical conversations with him at all. I pretty much worked one-on-one with Larry Gordon, who was a smart guy.

Why would you say the two are so different from each other?

Well, because Roger Corman was and is a real filmmaker. He is a director and writer himself, whereas Arkoff was just a businessman.

***Coffy* featured a strong, willful black woman in the lead role. You were really ahead of your time there, Jack!**

In retrospect, it seems that way but I wasn't thinking about it at the time, it was just something that I thought would be fun to do.

Was a blaxploitation movie something that you ever imagined making?

Well, it wasn't something that I *wanted* to do. I had an agent at the time and he said to me that AIP was looking for somebody to do a picture. Now, I was familiar with AIP because many of Roger's movies had been released through them and I had this meeting with Larry Gordon and I didn't know what they wanted me to make. It turned out to be a "black" film and my heart kind of sank because I didn't feel that this was a genre that I knew how to deal with — or even wanted to deal with. But when Larry said it was to be a black woman, I thought that it was the opportunity to do something really, really good with Pam Grier. So once I got into it and started working on it I became really enthusiastic.

In the film, Pam Grier talks about being "in a dream" and at one point she comes close to confessing her acts of murder to Carson, presumably because her guilt is overwhelming. In this sense, I think you humanize your charac-

ter a lot more than, for instance, Cleopatra Jones or Shaft. We never feel like Coffy is just some relentless vigilante.

Oh, yeah, yeah, that was on purpose. To me, the key to making the character believable is that she was so affected by her actions. She was almost in a dream state throughout the film — that is why this is the key line, where she says that she feels as if she is "in a dream." Interestingly enough, when I first met Quentin Tarantino he came up to me and told me how great my dialogue was and then he quoted that line.

It is the line that defines her humanity.

Yeah, and to me it works on a subliminal level. Some people viewing the movie might recognize that line as being interesting but fail to see the importance of it. To me, I think that is the line which sets up the story in a very believable way.

And the final shot of *Coffy* is very dreamlike — Grier walking along a beach at nighttime...

I put that in the script but I didn't actually shoot it. That was done second unit because they wanted something to put the end credits over, but I wrote that in the script.

Did you always have Pam Grier in mind as the character?

Oh, yeah, and like I said, she even worked with me a little bit on it and came up with new ideas. The studio, at that time, had not decided that they wanted to use her and even after the script was done, I had to really support her very strongly because they had other people in mind for the role. I always told her that there was no guarantee she would play it but I would still write it for her.

Why do you think that after *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* had made her a recognizable cult star, she never moved into the A-list?

I believe that she read a review and one of the reviewers said that she was so good she needed to work with better directors, so the next two movies she made were flops. Well, they weren't flops but they didn't do very well. She had other writers that didn't really know how to write for her — at least that is what I always thought. She wanted to be glamourous and play more respectable roles but it didn't work. People didn't know how to make use of her strengths.

She was still the first black female superstar, of course.

Well, a superstar within that genre, yeah.

I mean that before her, there had never been a black actress who was as visible or as popular.

No, not to that degree — she really represented the idea of black power and black is beautiful.

Did you ever think that you might be glamorizing vigilantism with *Coffy*?

[*Pauses*] I don't know — I just wanted to make a good story. I didn't have any ideas about glamorizing anything. The only thing that I wanted to do was to make the King George character — who is a drug dealer and also a pimp... I wanted to glamorize him to a certain extent, make him lovable in a way, and then have him brutally killed. I thought that would be very effective dramatically so to what extent I glamorized him was for that purpose.

You see, I'd argue that we don't really feel so sorry for King George because earlier in the film you tell us that he beat up one of his escorts.

Yeah, we are told that he cut her face and put her back to work — that's right, although we never see that...

No, but then perhaps what we imagine is even worse.

Oh, I wanted you to know that he could be a bad guy [*laughs*].

Well, I'd say that this stops you from ever feeling too sorry for him when he dies.

Yeah, that is right and very true — and now that you are reminding me of it, that is an example of the very small pieces of information that maybe people don't pay much attention to but which work on you very subliminally.

Pam Grier in badass mode for *Coffy*.

You have Booker Bradshaw as the main villain in *Coffy* and he is even more heinous than the white drug lords, which is quite unusual for a blaxploitation movie.

Yeah, well, I didn't want to make all of the bad guys white...

Although you do that in *Foxy Brown*.

Well, her brother is still pretty bad in *Foxy Brown* — he betrays her lover [*laughs*].

I'd say that Antonio Fargas is pathetic in *Foxy Brown*, rather than an outright bad character. You portray him as a useless junkie rather than a calculating villain like Booker Bradshaw in *Coffy*.

Well, maybe. And Booker is a wonderful actor, he studied with Laurence Olivier in London.

When he is finally killed in *Coffy*, it is as if you are saying that Grier can shoot as many drug pushers as she wants — but the politicians are society's real problem.

Well we don't know that she kills him, she shoots him in the crotch [*laughs*]...

Oh, come on...

Yeah, but she doesn't do that because of all the terrible things that he's done, what ultimately tips her over the edge is that he has a blonde [*laughs*]. You know — he's got a blonde in his bed after ordering her death. For me, that was the ultimate pay-off — the real killing offense.

From *The Big Doll House* through to *Foxy Brown*, the focus of your disdain is on authority and in each movie the characters work to destroy a corrupt hierarchy.

A disdain for authority has been the curse of my life [*laughs*]. I was never aware of that but I guess you are right.

Were you surprised when *Coffy* became such a big hit?

Yeah, I was surprised, sure. It got to number one at the box office and that was really rare for a blaxploitation movie. A lot of blaxploitation movies opened at number one and then dropped really quickly but *Coffy* worked its way up to number one through word of mouth. The advertising was very low-budget; it was just word of mouth that made it big.

Pam Grier without her trademark afro for a *Coffy* publicity shot.

So why do you think that its success didn't propel you into the big time?

After I had a big hit with *Coffy*, I did speak with other producers — precisely because I had just made this movie that had worked its way up to number one at the box office, which is very rare. Normally pictures open big and work their way down and I always thought that people would say, "Hey, this guy must have something." Instead I was told, "Aw, that's just a black picture, that doesn't count." So that's racism for you and I got stuck with that.

Your next movie *Foxy Brown* was originally going to be called *Burn*

***Coffy Burn* and done as a straight sequel, right?**

Yeah, and I thought that was quite an original title.

So what happened?

Just before we started shooting, the sales department at AIP decided that sequels weren't very good for business. They had released some sequels that had done horrible business but they were terrible movies and they didn't differentiate between a rubbish sequel and a good sequel — they just decided they didn't want to make any more sequels. So somebody in the sales department decided on the title *Foxy Brown* — some genius [*laughs*]...

Sid Haig's Memories of *Coffy*

When it came time for Jack to direct *Coffy*, you and he had worked together a lot in the past. Was it a case, by this point in his career, where he would write a part with you in mind and tell you about it before casting?

Yeah, and Jack has been extremely courteous in that manner. If he ever had anything that I could remotely do, or sometimes he would write a role for me ... then he would. We go back a long way. We have been working together since 1961 and I really appreciate everything that he has done for me.

Although you often played the heavy guy, there was a real comedy there and we can see that in *Coffy* as well.

Yes, and it has always been an interesting process with Jack because he is so clear about what it is that he wants from a character. I always just gave him that. I enjoy working with directors like that — directors who actually have a plan in mind because you can tell a lot of times when someone is just kinda shooting by the seat of his pants or he doesn't have an idea of what he is looking for in a character.

Although Quentin Tarantino has done his bit bringing Jack's movies to the attention of a new generation, do you think that mainstream critics will ever grasp the importance of his work?

I don't think he gets enough credit for a whole lot of stuff that he has done. When you look at most of his work, it is revolutionary. Even though Coppola didn't admit it, the [last] third of *Apocalypse Now* is *The Host*, Jack's short film. That is exactly what it is. I think Coppola's wife alluded to it, but that's okay [*laughs*]. It's nothing against Francis — I like the guy and everybody takes a little from everybody else but [*Apocalypse Now*] wouldn't have been the same were it not for Jack. He also really broke ground with *Spider Baby* because that was the first film dealing with a crazy family living out in the country killing people, you know? That was years before *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and yet those films are the ones that get the nod

when people are talking about that particular genre. So I don't think that Jack has [received] the credit that he deserves.

He also discovered Ellen Burstyn — she gave her first lead role in *Pit Stop*, which remains one of Jack's finest movies yet it is a race car picture, which sounds like the most boring thing in the world.

Well, that was the film that he least wanted to do. But Roger Corman told him that he was paying for a stock car movie and Jack wanted to do an art film. It basically boiled down to Roger saying, "Well, what do you want to do?" Jack said, "How about an arty stock car movie?" Roger said, "You know, as long as the cars go fast and somebody dies, I don't care." So that gave Jack the go-ahead to do what he did with that film.

She gave her motion picture performance in *Pit Stop*. You start off being this very arrogant, cocky young upstart but by the end of the film you are the unsung hero of the picture.

Yeah, Jack and I had a little conversation about that. I was kind of wondering if that sort of thing would work out — although it was certainly there in the writing. It was up to me to bring it to life. I don't know, you do things and you hope that they work out [*laughs*].

You have a great ensemble cast in *Coffy* — yourself and Pam, obviously, but also Booker Bradshaw, Allan Arbus...

Right, and Robert DoQui, all amazing actors who had not really been given the opportunity to show their talents and Jack did that. I just hope that there is a modicum of appreciation for him because he provided all of those people with an opportunity to show all of their skills. I certainly hope that people will recognize that.

Do you feel bad about killing King George in *Coffy*?

I didn't feel bad about it [*laughs*].

He meets quite a nasty death, though.

Oh, yeah, and the guy who was the stunt double for Robert DoQui actually got hurt in that stunt. He went head-first into a barrier and cracked his nose a little bit. But it was great and I appreciate the work that those guys do and have done over the years.

Jack says that he prefers *Coffy* to *Foxy Brown*, whereas I must admit that I enjoy *Foxy Brown* that little bit more. You were in both of them — where do you stand?

I prefer *Coffy*. First of all, it is an extraordinary cast in the film. Nothing against anybody who was in *Foxy Brown* — I don't want to start any wars [*laughs*]. But I just felt that the ensemble was better.

Pam Grier as Coffy and Robert DoQui as King George in *Coffy*.

I will say that the soundtrack is better in *Coffy*.

Oh, yeah.

You had already done a few films with Pam by the time of making *Coffy*, so you guys must have forged some kind of bond during that time, right?

Pam and I did six films together — it was crazy! When Quentin Tarantino called me, and I still don't know how he got my number, and informed me that I was going to be in *Jackie Brown* — and I had no choice in the matter — he didn't tell Pam that he cast me in a role. So when she showed up on the set, she was in total shock. But to answer your question — doing films out in the Philippines has a tendency to form a strong bond [between] people. It is nothing against the native people out there because the production crews were great and they did everything in the world that they could do to make life easier for us, but when you're running around in the jungle, looking out for snakes and finding a place to go to the bathroom, it gets a little intense. You kind of have to help each other through that process and you do begin to form close bonds with people. You are basically tied to each other for survival [*laughs*].

You guys had done stuff like *The Big Doll House* and *The Big Bird Cage* in the Philippines together — and these were more violent than *Coffy*.

Yeah, they were pretty strong but I think Jack has a connection to the films of the thirties where there were a lot of violent things happening on the screen but you never saw the blood, you never really saw the act happening. Kind of like the stabbing scene in *Psycho*—you never really saw it happen and that made it even scarier. So *The Big Doll House*—things never went too far, it never crossed the line.

Subsequent blaxploitation films were more violent than *Coffy* but without the social commentary. Do you think that's what killed the genre? The movies became all about how much violence was in there?

Right, that's the thing—the social commentary is in there with *Coffy* and you get a feel for what things were like at the time.

Do you think *Coffy* is a feminist film?

Oh yeah, sure—I mean, it's a revenge film but look at who is getting the revenge and why.

I asked Jack if he intended to make a feminist statement and he said he didn't intend to but I don't see any other way to read that ending ... where she castrates Booker Bradshaw with a gunshot to the crotch.

Publicity still of Pam Grier from *Coffy*.

Yeah, and in the very opening shot when she blows the guy's head off! Now that was scary to watch because the guy had 13 blood packs in the wig he was wearing, which were filled with pieces of meat and brain, really disgusting [*laughs*]. Well, it was shot in super-slow motion and it was loud! It was very scary to watch.

What do you remember about seeing *Coffy* for the first time?

Not a whole lot actually. I remember going to the screening—I don't think we ever had a premiere—and I recall it was so well-received. Sometimes if you have an audience full of film people, they can be quite brutal but they were all really enjoying it. Of course I was happy to see

Robert DoQui and Pam Grier in *Coffy*.

that kind of reaction but it took me by surprise because we can all be a bit cynical sometimes. But it was a great film to work on and I'm just so happy that people remember it and are out there buying the DVD. Every convention I am at, somebody comes up to me with a *Coffy* DVD to sign and that is a very pleasant surprise and it is just gratifying when people express that they relate to something you have done.

***Cleopatra Jones* was being made over at Warner Bros while you were making *Coffy*. Was that spoken about on the set?**

Yeah, I vaguely remember hearing about that. I was also involved with the Lambada wars years later* which was a similar situation [*laughs*]. But, yeah, I remember hearing about it and thinking, "Well, that's good — that shows that people understand we have a good franchise going here." Our franchise being Pam Grier — who has stood the test of time.

Not as many people know who played Cleopatra Jones.

I know — Tamara Dobson! I knew Tamara Dobson played that role because years later I did *Jason of Star Command*, the television series, with her.

**Sid appeared in 1990's* The Forbidden Dance*, which went up against Lambada at the box office; both tanked.*

Back in 1973, how was *Coffy* perceived when it came out? Take us back in time...

I think it was extremely ahead of its time and perceived in that way. Among the intelligent people of the day, there was a certain amount of gratitude towards Jack for breaking ground with these films. First of all, there were hardly any African-American stunt people until *Coffy* came about. Bob Minor had to basically teach people as they went along how to do stunts. So even in that area, forget about the acting area, Jack created job opportunities and that has gone unrecognized. When *Pulp Fiction* was first released, Jon Stewart had Quentin Tarantino on his show and he asked him, "In your mind, who is the greatest living American director?" Quentin didn't even pause — he said, "Jack Hill." To which Jon Stewart said, "Well, who in the hell is Jack Hill?" I think that is a tragedy — the guy who has given so much is still unknown by the vast majority of people. It is almost unbelievable.

Foxy Brown (1974)

Jack Hill: Director-writer-editor

Stars: Pam Grier (Foxy Brown), Antonio Fargas (Link Brown), Peter Brown (Steve Elias), Terry Carter (Michael Anderson/Dalton Ford), Kathryn Loder (Katherine Wall), Harry Holcombe (Judge Fenton), Sid Haig (Hays), Juanita Brown (Claudia), Sally Ann Stroud (Deb), Bob Minor (Oscar), Tony Giorgio (Eddie), Fred Lerner (Bunyon), Judith Cassmore (Vicki), H.B. Haggerty (Brandi), Boyd "Red" Morgan (Slauson)

Producers: Buzz Feitshans, Samuel Z. Arkoff

Plot: Foxy Brown's brother Link is a junkie in debt to the drug kingpins of Los Angeles, and unless he pays up soon he will be killed. Link finds an alternate way to wipe his slate clean — namely, by revealing the true identity of his sister's boyfriend. "Michael Anderson," Foxy's "new" lover, is actually undercover agent Dalton Ford, who has undergone drastic plastic surgery in order to protect his identity after participating in a major drug bust. When Dalton is shot dead following Link's revelation, Foxy goes undercover as an escort for Miss Katherine, a city crime boss who pays off high court judges by sending them some attractive female company free of charge. It isn't long before the true nature of Foxy's vendetta is discovered and she is taken captive by two of Loder's henchmen, injected with heroin and raped. Of course, you can't keep the star of *Coffy* down and soon she is ready to fight — as *Foxy Brown* comes to a shocking conclusion...

About the film: "She's brown sugar and spice but if you don't treat her nice she'll put you on ice"—*poster tagline for* Foxy Brown. If 1973's double-whammy of *Coffy* and *Cleopatra Jones* demonstrated the popularity of a female-led blaxploitation film, then *Foxy Brown* showed that the novelty had yet to wear

thin. Not only was the movie a success but it is possibly Hill's most famous work, even inspiring the stage name for the popular contemporary American rap star Inga Marchand. *Foxy Brown* also confirmed Pam Grier's position as the queen of the genre — even if it meant that she would find it difficult to secure suitable leading roles once the blaxploitation craze fizzled out later in the decade. Nevertheless, Grier no longer had to settle for the low-budget wages provided by Roger Corman, who began looking to cash in on the star's success with his own *Coffy–Foxy Brown* spin-off entitled *T.N.T. Jackson* (1975). When asked about this, Corman notes:

> We had started Pam and she had done, I think, about six films for us and her salary had gotten so high that we couldn't afford her anymore [*laughs*]. So I said, "Okay, we'll start all over again and find a new girl." So we found Jeanie Bell who was very pretty, even prettier than Pam Grier, and Jeanie was good but she didn't have that hard edge that Pam had. So *T.N.T. Jackson* was a successful film for us but not as successful as Pam's films had been. It was a definite attempt to continue the Pam Grier film but without Pam [*laughs*].

With *Coffy* Hill had expertly crafted a vigilante story wherein the heroine hunts down and murders the people she believes to be responsible for her sister's addiction to heroin. That said, however, Hill failed to provide Grier with a villain who has her second-guessing from the start of *Coffy* to the end. In other words — whereas James Bond had Blofeld, Grier never had a "master villain" that she could pit her wits against in her blaxploitation debut. However, this is rectified in *Foxy Brown*.

If *Coffy*'s immediate influence was within the blaxploitation genre, then *Foxy Brown* effectively lays out the pattern that would inform many of the revenge-vigilante films that would follow during the remainder of the decade. Curiously, 1974 spat out a small flurry of movies that dealt with this theme, among them Michael Winner's more mainstream *Death Wish* and the blaxploitation oddity *The Klansman*, which starred Lee Marvin and O.J. Simpson. However, in Pam Grier's raped, beaten and drugged-up Foxy Brown — who then proceeds to escape from certain death and annihilate her abusers one by one — we can see the formula later used in such notorious exploitation hits as *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), *Angel of Vengeance* and *Mother's Day* (both 1980). Furthermore, preceding what would become the rape-revenge film's most celebrated sequence (Camille Keaton casually lopping off the penis of a rapist in *I Spit on Your Grave*) is Pam Grier literally handing someone the sliced-off genitals of their lover in a pickle bowl. In this one, gruesome gesture, Hill effectively laid down the gauntlet for a series of films that would become increasingly excessive. Furthermore, as at least one critic has documented, Grier "pretty much originated the action hero of a strong, independent black woman who prevails against the long odds of a society indifferent to her suffering."[9]

Unlike *Coffy*, Grier's arch nemesis in *Foxy Brown* is a woman, the suitably nasty Miss Katherine Wall, played by Kathryn Loder (who also cut an impos-

ing presence in *The Big Doll House*). Perhaps in anticipation of accusations of misogyny, Hill has the most heinous deeds in *Foxy Brown* approved by Loder's character. For instance, in *Foxy Brown*'s most grueling sequence, Grier is captured by Loder, beaten and then sent out to her desert ranch where she is injected with heroin and violated by two men. After this punishment, one really does want to see Grier seek revenge and she does so by escaping and lighting the two rapists on fire before taking out Loder's entire posse of drug hustlers. The idea of pushing the female lead into areas of severe discomfort, and highlighting the animalistic nature of her abusers (so that the audience is left with no choice but to cheer their eventual demise), would become a staple of the rape-revenge genre.

Released as the blaxploitation craze was on its last legs, *Foxy Brown* is a far grittier film than the other female-led genre efforts of the time, which includes the bizarre horror hybrid *Sugar Hill*, the comical thriller *Honeybaby, Honeybaby* (both 1974), Matt Cimber's above-average *Lady Cocoa* (1975) and the mediocre sequel *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* (1975). As he did with *Coffy*, Hill sets *Foxy Brown* in modern-day Los Angeles and plays out most of the action with a straight face — although the title character's heroic brutality is more cartoon-like than in the director's previous effort.

Foxy Brown begins with a psychedelic credit sequence that highlights Grier's newfound fame. Her name now precedes the film's title, as we are told that we are watching "Pam Grier as—*Foxy Brown*." The actress's figure dominates the credits as she dances and poses in a number of sexy outfits (including a string bikini), all to a funky soul number by Willie Hutch. However, this is all a bit misleading — and viewing this colorful introduction could well lead one to think that *Foxy Brown* is going to be a cheesy, ridiculous action picture as opposed to the tight-knit, violent drama that is about to unfold.

From here we are introduced to Foxy's brother, Link Brown (played by *Starsky and Hutch* co-star Antonio Fargas). Hill actually stages one of the best sequences of his entire career during the first five minutes of *Foxy Brown*: Fargas is cornered by two heavies at a fast food stand and, it would seem, is sure to be shot dead. However, he is "rescued" when two cops stop by and decide to have a coffee. Fargas sensibly stays within reach of the police, but they are only going to be there for so long. Thinking fast, he runs to a nearby phone booth and calls his sister, asking her to come to his rescue. In the meantime, the cops are quickly coming to the end of their break...

Hill's direction in this scene is extremely well calculated. Each character is focused on for just long enough to make sure that an air of suspense begins to build up and it is a testament to the director and his cast that our sympathies are immediately placed with Fargas. For example, the actor showcases—right from the get-go— a weak and worn-down presence that is in conflict with the two focused, muscular, professional gangsters who stalk him. Therefore, we are thrown into a scenario where the weak are up against the strong — and

Peter Brown and Pam Grier in *Foxy Brown* (1974).

although we know nothing about Fargas (and during *Foxy Brown* we *will* come to dislike him), it is a relief when he is finally saved by Grier. Any filmmaker seeking to learn how to create a tense, involving scenario would do well to seek out *Foxy Brown* and carefully study this gripping opening.

Far more than he did with *Coffy*, Hill plays out *Foxy Brown*'s "bad" white characters against the "good" black characters, with only Fargas proving to be the exception to the rule. The crime lords at the start of the feature are white, which is the case with all of the Mafioso controlled by Loder's slinky villainess. Consequently, *Foxy Brown* does not feature any powerful — but corrupt — African-American characters the way that *Coffy* had Booker Bradshaw's Brunswick and Robert DoQui's King George. One could argue, therefore, that *Foxy Brown* is the epitome of "blaxploitation" — a movie that takes place in a world where the Caucasian characters are corrupt (in one scene, a room full of judges are "paid off" with sex from Loder's salacious working girls). In complete contrast, the black characters are working to clean up the streets and this is best typified by a positive-thinking vigilante gang — led by stuntman-actor Bob Minor — which seeks to take out the drug pushers. "I don't know — vigi-

lante justice?" asks Foxy's boyfriend Dalton Ford (Terry Carter). "It's as American as apple pie," grins Grier in response. Considering that this is said by a black woman to a group of African-American youngsters, it has to be treated with some degree of irony — perhaps even a sense of "uprising." After all, in light of the then-recent history of the Ku Klux Klan and the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, there is some kind of poetic justice in Grier's words.

Most important to *Foxy Brown* is Grier's likable performance. As he did in *Coffy*, Hill emphasizes that the actress is not just some senseless killing machine. For instance, even after finding out that her brother is responsible for the death of her lover, Foxy takes it relatively easy on him — shooting out his ear drum rather than killing him and, in the process, forcing him to reveal some information in regards to the identity of the person who runs the city's drug syndicate. Then, in perhaps the movie's most memorable piece of dialogue, Grier storms out of her sibling's apartment — leaving it in total disarray — while Fargas's girlfriend Deb (Sally Ann Stroud) asks, "Who was that?" He responds with the movie's infamous line: "That's my sister, baby, and she's a whole lotta woman!"

Grier goes undercover as Misty Cotton, an escort who manages to get hired by Miss Katherine. "You tell me who you want done and I'll do the hell out of them," beams Foxy before she is given the task of entertaining a high court judge. She is accompanied by another escort, Claudia (Juanita Brown), who is not only addicted to "uppers" but works for Katherine under the threat of death and is unable to escape back to her husband and young child. With Claudia suitably out of her head, Foxy is able to humiliate the judge, which leads to her being hunted down by Katherine's hired hands, led by her boyfriend Steve.

In the interim, Hill throws in a hilarious — and well-staged — barroom brawl, only with lesbians taking the place of the rednecks that are typically seen in such Hollywood set pieces. With this simple gender change, Hill illustrates that women can be just as brutal as their male counterparts — and Grier smashing a chair across one lady's head ("I got my black belt in bar stools," sneers the actress in another unforgettable moment) certainly reinforces the point. Perhaps, sight unseen, the director could be accused of pandering to the stereotype of the "butch" lesbian but this image really only holds up with one decidedly macho female protagonist (the same one who takes a bar stool across the skull, incidentally). Indeed, it is refreshing to see the feminine Claudia (who takes refuge in the bar) bring Grier into the establishment — and there is no indication that the customers are gay, such is Hill's obvious desire to stay clear of anything blatant or condescending. This is a far cry from his previous liaison with homosexual personalities in *The Big Bird Cage*.

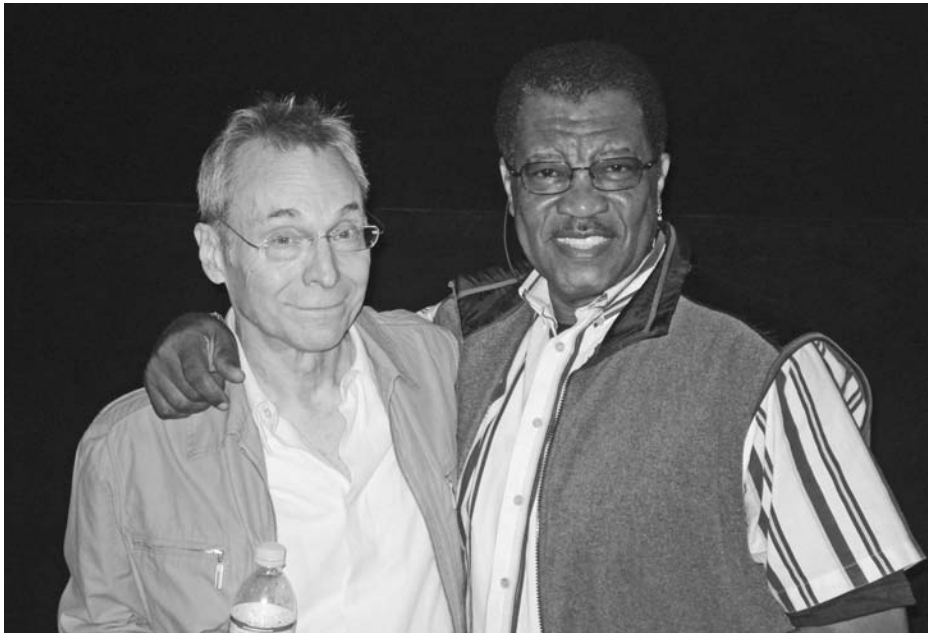
However, after this comparatively jovial barroom brawl *Foxy Brown* turns unexpectedly nasty. Although, up until this moment, the film has been less vio-

lent than *Coffy*, Hill then has Grier captured, tied up and beaten. She is then sent to an isolated desert ranch where she is raped and injected with heroin. After escaping from this nightmarish situation, Foxy is focused on revenge — but first the mob takes care of her brother and his girlfriend Deb. In the most gruesome scene that Hill ever directed, the poor girl has her throat cut and bleeds profusely over the floor. Fargas is let off comparatively lightly when he is quickly shot dead.

This leads us into the movie's final act, as Foxy rallies some troops in the shape of the vigilante street gang, and heads out to the desert near the Mexican border in order to take care of Miss Katherine's thugs and her "beloved" Steve. As aforementioned, Steve has his penis sliced off and Foxy makes her return to Los Angeles to confront Katherine in person; Foxy hands her the genitals of her lover, preserved in a pickle jar, and leaves her to mourn ... alive. "Death is too easy for you, bitch, I want you to suffer," growls Grier, as she exits the movie, every bit as alone as she was when somberly treading the beach during the ending of *Coffy*.

Although Hill prefers *Coffy* to *Foxy Brown*, the latter is arguably just a little bit more entertaining — thanks largely to the presence of the underrated, and largely forgotten about, Loder, who offers up a fantastic villain to Grier's heroic title character. From the movie's excellent beginning, which is capped off with a daredevil stunt sequence (a drug honcho grabs hold of Grier's automobile as she speeds through the late night city streets), to its brutal finale, *Foxy Brown* is one of the finest action pictures ever made. Hill also makes perhaps his finest satirical stab at the idea of white America having to answer to a black hierarchy when one of Minor's vigilantes takes out a corrupt cop and dresses in his uniform, promptly scaring the hell out of a retreating white character who fails to notice the officer's race until he turns around.

Hill also continues the themes that he explored in *Coffy*, including the idea of "reclaiming" the streets from corruption and giving the individual a chance at a better life. "Lives are bought and sold," states Grier when she tries to convince her local vigilante group to follow her to the Mexican border and smash Katherine's empire. Once again, we have a hint that Hill is criticizing capitalism through his onscreen characters — this being the economic system under which "lives are bought and sold" every day. The director further emphasizes this through the character of Link Brown, played by Fargas. Link fears the drug pushers, and does not want to be in debt to them, but nevertheless he spends whatever money he can obtain on their product; he is unable to stop supporting the very establishment that keeps him weakened. Consumers every day have exactly the same dilemma — the wealthy get wealthier as the "little guy" continues to pay for their produce. As he did in *Coffy*, Hill equates the "business" on the streets as comparable to the ethics of major commerce, with both designed to keep the lower classes buying what is being sold. Fargas makes a speech which indicates that when a society places materialism and personal



Jack Hill, left, in 2007 with stunt man Bob Minor, who worked on *Coffy, Foxy Brown* and *Switchblade Sisters* (courtesy Elijah Drenner).

wealth above anything else, a number of poor people will, ultimately, turn to alternative methods in order to grab their piece of the pie. "I watch TV and I see all of them people in all of them fine homes they live in and all of them cars they drive and I get all full of ambition," he says. "Now you tell me what I'm supposed to do with all of that ambition I got?" Selling drugs is his answer—as it, unfortunately, still is for many people in impoverished areas that, nevertheless, see the promise of a "better life" dangled in front of them by the mass media every day. As he did with *Coffy*, Hill makes a connection between a society that "sells" the wealth of the "American Dream" as realistic for everyone (but which needs rich and poor to keep its economy afloat) and the boom in the illegal drug trade.

This is not to say that *Foxy Brown*—as one of the most recognizable blaxploitation hits—is not concerned with race relations; in fact, Hill writes another wonderful speech for Fargas in which his character illustrates the career options open to him back in 1974. "Foxy, look, I'm a black man," he tells his sister. "I don't know how to sing and I don't know how to dance and I don't know how to preach to a congregation. I'm too small to be a football hero and I'm too ugly to be elected mayor." Indeed—considering these societal boundaries—*what is he expected to do*? In amongst such thoughtful commentary, is Hill's expected "money shots" for the grindhouse audience. We are barely five min-

utes into the film and Grier is seen wearing a see-through nightgown. Strangely, however, the actress is not as sexualized as she is in *Coffy*, with far less time given to shots of her ample cleavage. Furthermore, contrary to what would follow in more graphic rape-revenge films such as *I Spit on Your Grave*, Hill only shows us the aftermath of his character's violation — and, while it is not an appealing sight, it is arguably all the more powerful for being left to the imagination. *Foxy Brown* stands as one of the less sexy roles of Grier's heyday, even if she is permitted to deliver some provocative lines ("The darker the berry, the sweeter the juices," she tells the high court judge whom she has been paid to copulate with).

Foxy Brown was the last Hill-Grier collaboration and it marked the swan song for Sid Haig and the director as well (the performer makes a belated, and brief, appearance 75 minutes in as an airline captain). Although Haig would later re-emerge in 2003 as a leading man of the modern horror movie, thanks to Rob Zombie's gruesome *House of 1000 Corpses*, the real success story of the film would be producer Buzz Feitshans, who would cross over into producing such mainstream blockbusters as 1990's *Total Recall* and 1995's *Die Hard: With a Vengeance*. *Foxy Brown*'s leading lady would come to dismiss the term "blaxploitation" which has stuck with her throughout her prestigious career:

> Many of us have completely denounced that term. All we wanted to do with the films was show our own culture. Many of us did well. We got a lot of people in the unions, a lot of people began their internships and apprenticeships through these projects, so basically there are more pros than cons. The only exploitation was that, yes, there was violence and killing — but that's in any movie.[10]

Jack Hill's Memories of *Foxy Brown*

After the success of *Coffy*, was the budget for *Foxy Brown* much higher?

It was actually functionally less because they had to pay me more and they had to pay Pam Grier more so that left me with less money for the rest of the cast. As a result, I couldn't get the level of actors that I wanted. I had stuntmen playing actor's parts.

You mentioned that *Coffy* reached number one at the American box office but *Foxy Brown* did not. Any ideas why?

Because *Coffy* is much better. *Foxy Brown* is more of a play on themes as opposed to *Coffy*, which has a very strong and powerful emotional core to it — and that is because I had time to work on the script. Plus, doing a sequel, you feel that you've already used up your best ideas on the first one and so you tend to use ideas that you originally rejected and in the case of *Foxy Brown* I didn't really have enough time to develop the script as thoroughly as *Coffy*. The other part of it is that you use all of your best ideas on a certain subject matter, I think — but it is hard to say. I knew that going in but I tried to make up for it by making the movie even more outrageous — if that was possible.

Jack Hill, right, directs Pam Grier and Terry Carter in *Foxy Brown*.

How do you think you could have made it better?

It could have been a lot better if I had just been given a little bit more money and time [*laughs*]. It is the same thing with *Coffy*: Every time I see it, I always think about what else I could have done with more time and money. These films were done so fast. But in a certain way, it almost makes them more charming because they are both a little more crude than your slick Hollywood movies. I didn't have as much time to write a good script and they didn't decide until the very last minute that they even wanted me to do it. You see, I had made the unforgivable sin of walking out on a movie. By the time that *Coffy* was made, [AIP] was also making *Dillinger* and that was supposed to be the studio's big, breakthrough movie. It had a $1 million budget and it had that guy who was crazy about guns writing it, John Milius. I was invited to the screening and I walked out on it thinking that nobody would pay any attention. They didn't want anything more to do with me because of that. But then *Dillinger* didn't do that well and *Coffy* was their big hit of the year so I was ultimately forgiven.

Perhaps the reason I prefer *Foxy Brown* is because you introduce Kathryn Loder as Grier's nemesis early on, so that we have a bad guy-good guy situation going on from the outset. *Coffy* lacks that.

Yeah, that's true, and I realize that and, interestingly enough, *Foxy Brown*

has become the more popular film but I think that might be because it is more extreme and more outrageous. You know, the original script was much more elaborate than what we did. It was originally going to be shot in Texas, along some waterfronts, and the airplane that we used was going to be a float plane but they pulled the film out of Texas because the labor unions were threatening to wham them — it was totally nuts. But all of that stuff was just dressing — it didn't affect the core of the story.

As with *Coffy*, there seems to be a strong anti-drugs message in *Foxy Brown*. Does this reflect your personal beliefs?

Uh ... no, but it is something that is of great concern to the black community. So that was one reason for dealing with it. But *Foxy Brown* didn't have as much to do with drugs as *Coffy*. *Foxy Brown* was really about prostitutes being used to influence politicians.

But the prostitutes are used by the drug lords in order to seduce the judges who send their henchmen to prison.

Oh, yeah, to let out the drug dealers — well, that's true.

When Grier goes undercover as an escort, she calls herself Cotton. Was this your homage to the pre-blaxploitation movie *Cotton Comes to Harlem*?

No, I never even saw that movie.

Why does Sid Haig only have a very small role in *Foxy Brown*?

Well, that is just the way the story worked out. I didn't have any other role for him.

You stage a pretty good splatter effect when the guy gets hit by the plane and the propeller tears him to shreds.

Actually, I didn't think that looked so good, but it was out of my hands.

Did you get final cut on *Coffy* or *Foxy Brown*?

No, AIP had a guy in charge of post-production at that time. Of course now the Directors Guild rules are very strong — they have a treaty of rights, but back then there was nothing like that. Well, this guy always wanted to rush the first rough cut and the editor was someone hired by the studio — he was someone's son-in-law or something. He basically didn't even want me around, but I shot the film in such a way that the editor had little choice with what to do with it. I never shoot anything that I don't intend to put in the picture, so it got edited pretty much the way that I wanted to edit it, but they always wanted to make the editor look bad. The post-production guy could say, "I'll fix it, I'll save the picture" and then they would just go and edit it normally, but that was just the way it was done in those days. Everyone wanted to take credit for the film themselves.

How did the scene where Pam Grier cuts off the guy's penis and puts it in a pickle jar come to mind?

The pickle jar scene came about because I was so frustrated about how the studio was treating me on this picture. I felt that because *Coffy* had been such a big success that they were afraid that I would become a prima donna and so the idea was just a joke in my mind. They liked it and they got it and I became stuck with it.

I would say that *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* are both critical of politicians and a society that equates materialism with personal happiness.

Well, you could say that, but a lot of the time people interpret things in a film or a story and assume that the author is trying to make this point or that point and it isn't really true. Those things just come up because the author thinks it makes an interesting scene or yarn or character and not because the author is trying to make a political point.

But the Antonio Fargas speech is highly political. Where he says, "I watch TV and I see all of them people in all of them fine homes they live in and all of them cars they drive and I get all full of ambition..."

Yeah, I know what you mean and Antonio thought it was a great speech. That was an idea that had entered my mind from reading *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin. I had read that in the sixties and it made an impression on me and so that speech came from the book.

So you wouldn't disagree that there is genuine anti-materialism, maybe even anti-capitalism, in *Foxy Brown*?

I don't disagree with that although I only use that sort of thing because I think that it makes an interesting character or scene. However, my wife says to me that if I didn't feel that way, then I couldn't have expressed things that way. I do remember that very early on in the sixties my father got mad at me because I was opposed to the Vietnam War. The one good thing about the free press is that we had this paper called *The Guardian*, and this is not to be confused with the British newspaper, and we had this Australian Marxist reporter who was reporting from the Viet Cong side. I can't remember this guy's name but he was a very famous reporter and I read this and it was very different from the other press that I was reading [on the war] and it just had a ring of truth, because it was very different from the fantasy that I was getting from the American press. So that always stuck with me and if it radicalized me in some ways, which shows in these movies, then so be it.

Any reason why you didn't make another blaxploitation picture?

AIP offered me another movie after *Foxy Brown* but it wasn't a blaxploitation film, it was called *Rape Squad*. I didn't really turn that one down, I read the script and although the writer was pretty good I thought that the script still needed some work. Some of the scenes were just impossible to stage the way

that he had written them — they just didn't make any sense. I told AIP that I would be interested in doing it but I would need to rewrite the script. They didn't want that, of course, they felt the script was fine the way it was and they thought that I was trying to get extra money from doing a rewrite. John Prizer, who later became my partner, was the producer on it. My assistant director on *Foxy Brown*, Frank Beetson, was a really good assistant director and when I brought the picture in a day ahead of schedule, [AIP was] very impressed and I gave him the credit for it, which was right — he was always prepared. Well, in their ignorance and stupidity in regards to the difference between a director and an AD, they got him to direct *Rape Squad* and he couldn't do it. He read the script and didn't realize that the things that were written down could not be filmed so he lasted a week before they fired him. They replaced him with a guy that I knew who was at least a competent director [Bob Kelljan]. The result was that John Prizer had to rewrite the script every night for the next day — John recognized this too and the whole thing was a mess, and the movie was a big flop. I'm glad that I didn't do it because it was a bit distasteful — the idea of a rape squad, that isn't my idea of a feminist movie [*laughs*].

What is the current status of the remake of *Foxy Brown*?

MGM went through two writers and so many complete drafts. I guess they never got a script that they liked. I have been working on a proposal to do a new one but my heart is not really in it. I have been there and done that. I know that they originally want to do a remake of *Foxy Brown* with Halle Berry producing and starring in it. *Halle Berry*? I don't know how that'll work.

6

From Cheerleaders to Sci-Fi

The Swinging Cheerleaders (1974)

AKA: *Locker Room Girls*; *Stand Up and Holler*

Jack Hill: Director

Writers: David Kidd (as Betty Conklin), Jack Hill (as Jane Witherspoon)

Cast: Jo Johnston (Kate), Rainbeaux Smith (Andrea), Colleen Camp (Mary Ann), Rosanne Katon (Lisa), Ron Hajek (Buck), Ric Carrott (Ross), Jason Sommers (Prof. Thorpe), Ian Sander (Ron), George Wallace (Mr. Putnam), Jack Denton (Coach Turner), John Quade (Belski), Bob Minor (Ryan), Mae Mercer (Jessica Thorpe)

Producer: John Prizer

Plot: Plucky brunette Kate is a campus feminist at Mesa State University where, much to the appreciation of her hippy boyfriend Ron, she decides to go undercover as a cheerleader and expose how demeaning and sexist the practice is. However, she soon finds herself bonding with two other cheerleaders, African-American Lisa, who is having an affair with her English teacher Prof. Thorpe, and virginal blonde Andrea. Kate falls in love with star quarterback Buck, much to the chagrin of his girlfriend Mary Ann. The big story is happening behind the scenes: The school's principal (Mary Ann's father) Mr. Putnam and some teachers are attempting to rig the games in order to obtain big bucks from a secret gambling ring. When Kate finds out, she decides to do what she can to make sure that the final game of the season is won by Mesa State — much to the chagrin of Putnam, who is banking on his home team losing.

About the film: "Don't fool yourself, kid — money buys happiness. That is what it is all about. Believe me"—*Prof. Thorpe (Jason Sommers to Lisa [Rosanne Katon]*). Every bit the journeyman director, Hill followed his hits *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* with a sex comedy which, for the first time in his career, he had a financial stake in. Thus, instead of being just a hired hand on *The Swinging Cheerleaders*, Hill could actually make proper money from the feature — something that the financial success of his previous four movies likely

instigated. Co-writer David Kidd was brought in by Hill and producer John Prizer to bang out an initial draft. The reason he is not credited has to do with union regulations, as Kidd explains:

> I had worked with Aaron Spelling on a couple of television shows but I did not want to work in television and so I decided to become a freelance screenwriter. I hooked up with Jack through a mutual agent of ours and we talked about some projects. Jack told me he had a deal to make a movie called *Stand Up and Holler* and that is what it says on my script. We talked about it and I wrote the first draft. It was to be a sexploitation movie and I had about two weeks to write it. I was in the Writers Guild back then and this was a non-union movie so I got no credit on the film and didn't expect any. I just got paid and that was that.

A lightweight sex comedy was a risky endeavor even for 1974. By this time, hardcore had arrived in the North American marketplace, led by 1972's twin blockbusters of *Deep Throat* and *Behind the Green Door*, and continued with the overwhelming critical and commercial success of 1973's *The Devil in Miss Jones*. As a result, the sight of naked breasts, or simulated sex, was no longer a way of encouraging the thrill-seeking drive-in audience to part with their cash. Consequently, exploitation filmmakers such as Radley Metzger and David Friedman were experimenting with making hardcore pictures while pornographic actresses, such as Marilyn Chambers and Linda Lovelace, were quickly becoming household names.

That said, 1973's largely awful softcore romp *The Cheerleaders* had been a reasonable success and *Deep Throat* and its ilk were causing legal problems, and outright bans, in various parts of the United States. Moreover, *The Swinging Cheerleaders* was made for the drive-in audience — and drive-in cinemas, in general, did not show real sex movies. Nevertheless, what is perhaps most interesting about *The Swinging Cheerleaders* is how reserved it is, representing a real departure from the sex and violence of Hill's previous four features and depicting a world populated by teenaged angst and sexual awakenings. Of course, this is not to say that there aren't bare breasts in the film (there are) — but the general plot is focused on the love lives of three beautiful young women. Jo Johnston's Kate becomes the very thing she loathes — a simpering groupie of the campus football team, sleeping with the prize quarterback and turning her back on the liberal, hippy boyfriend whom she lives with. Rosanne Katon's Lisa is in love with an older man — her teacher to boot — who promises he will divorce his wife for her, although for the time being their relationship remains a tawdry secret. Rainbeaux Smith's Andrea is a frustrated virgin, flirting with the idea of losing her innocence to her boyfriend Ross but never quite being able to go through with it. Amazingly, given that two men wrote *The Swinging Cheerleaders* (under female pseudonyms no less), the onscreen personalities never come across as pure fantasy figures. At the end of the picture, they have all, to a greater or lesser extent, become independent young women — influenced by their life experiences but, nevertheless, more aware than ever of their own destiny.

Jack Hill directs Rosanne Katon, left, Rainbeaux Smith and Jo Johnston in *The Swinging Cheerleaders* (1974).

There are still hints of sexism in the film, particularly in regards to Kate's transition from someone who seeks to expose the innate objectification of women that is inherent in cheerleading but nevertheless grows fond of being the object of male attention once she becomes what she is so initially opposed to. Her pleasure at joining the cheerleading squad is so evident that she does not even argue with stealing one of the team's boyfriends. In other words, Kate goes from the brainy academic to the sexually available object of heterosexual fantasy—a transformation that it is hard to conclude is totally positive. Yet, the character also comes across as a woman who becomes liberated through being able to break free of the chains of her domineering live-in partner—and it is her cheerleading that ultimately enables her to do this. For instance, when she announces to her hippy beau that her journalism term paper will be on the link between sexism and cheerleading, he replies, "If it's good, I will edit it myself and put it in the special edition." As her boyfriend, Ron, is the publisher of a left-leaning student paper, he is notably less concerned with his girlfriend's goals than with his own—which is to put her hard work into his own journal and, moreover, to "edit it" himself, presumably because he feels that his girlfriend is incapable of doing this.

The veiled sexism of Ron's character is also reflective of Sid Haig's Django character in *The Big Bird Cage*—and indicates a cynicism, or perhaps disap-

pointment, that Hill may have felt regarding the liberal movement of the time. In both instances, the left-leaning "socialist" males are, in fact, pathetic characters. Furthermore, just as Haig's Django makes a comment about "raping" the captive Anitra Ford after kidnapping her, so too does Ian Sander's Ron instigate a gang bang with Rainbeaux Smith's Andrea, only seconds after she loses her virginity to him. In each case Hill appears to be stating that the hippy movement of the late 1960s–early '70s was inauthentic — a way to appear "heroic" or "alternative" and, as such, attract more interest from women.

Hill was not the only director to think this way. Ralph Bakshi's highly political animated masterpiece *Fritz the Cat* (1972) cast its title character as a "right on" revolutionary — preaching political mumbo jumbo in a dire attempt to score drugs and sex. In *The Swinging Cheerleaders* Ron, Hill brings Fritz to the screen in live action form — with the stoned publisher even bemoaning to Rainbeaux Smith that he has been "subjected to backroom tortures that you couldn't even imagine" (before showing her a nonexistent scar). That he is quick to have sex with Smith, and then ask his friends over to do something truly "depraved" (the word he uses to describe the resulting bout of group sex), indicates that his goal is neither peace nor love. It is also the one truly uncomfortable sequence of the picture. Whereas Hill does leave the "gang bang" offscreen, we see the aftermath of Smith's ordeal — with the actress led to her student flat by her boyfriend, her face scratched and bruised — and describing the ordeal, to Johnston and Katon, as "horrible." Yet her friends are more interested in the skuzzy details of what happened and Hill quickly has the character shake off the experience as if it were nothing more than a drunken kiss with the high school nerd. Whether or not Smith actually acquiesced to the group sex session is never confirmed but, as long as the possibility of rape is in the air (and it is), it goes without saying that the scene does not fit into the more jovial comedic interludes that punctuate the picture. Instead, it sticks out as an unwanted, and unnecessary, set piece.

However, it is baffling — especially giving the anti-capitalist rhetoric of *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* — to see Hill once again present a liberal character in such a negative manner. Consequently, the real heroes of *The Swinging Cheerleaders* are the preppie jocks themselves — presented as good, old-fashioned, all–American gentlemen. Even so, the main focus of Hill's ire is likely just authority as a whole. For instance, in *The Swinging Cheerleaders* both the "old guard" (the money-obsessed college hierarchy who seek to fix the football game) and the "new guard" (the hippy liberal who wants to break down the establishment but who is really just a sadistic control freak) are equally repulsive. This also goes for *The Big Bird Cage* wherein Haig's revolutionary is really an unfocused, not to mention reactionary, petty thief, and the vanguard of the movie's prison is not only corrupt but also misogynistic and power-hungry. In both films, Hill seems to be suspicious of any authoritarian outlook — whether it be left or right wing.

Looking at the time in which *The Swinging Cheerleaders* was made, one can see this in all of its unfortunate glory—from the uprising of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge to the human rights abuses, and strict censorship, orchestrated by the governments of Fidel Castro and Mao Zedong. Seeing these abuses taking place under, seemingly, Marxist governments may have been difficult enough, but in Hill's America the Republican cabinet of Richard Nixon was leading the country—an "alternative" that many did not want to think about. Indeed, the Nixon administration is still best remembered for the atrocious continuation of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal—while a burgeoning, heavy-handed conservatism was also taking over such allies as Britain (Edward Heath was the prime minister until 1974) and France (Georges Pompidou was the controversial, right-wing French president at the time, and suspected of links with the criminal underworld). In light of this, the scamming, immoral principles of *The Swinging Cheerleaders*' teachers and football coaches is highly reflective of its time (it is also worth nothing that every major player in the movie is carrying some kind of secret or split personality). Eagle-eyed viewers will also notice the vandalized image of Nixon's face on the wall of Ron's flat—although, given his character's personality traits, this is to be expected.

Although the picture is more focused on its female characters, it does give its leading man some room to shine and Ron Hajek, as the impossibly well-groomed Buck, is every bit the horny, but likable, star athlete. Perhaps best of all, Hill is careful not to make Buck too threatening to the viewer. Therefore, although he is the ultimate alpha male (attracting the attention of both Colleen Camp and Jo Johnston), Buck never comes across as too cocky, confident or overbearing—something that is important in making the viewer relate to him. Yes, he attracts beautiful women but he also has a chivalrous side and takes a stand against what is wrong, opting to sacrifice a place at a top college, and a share of the winnings, to win the final Mesa State football game. In other words, he is a character the audience can get behind, regardless of whether they were the nerd, the drop-out or the sports star at college. Hill also makes a very sly dig at the overtly masculine, testosterone-fueled football players by hinting at the homosexuality of one of his jocks, namely Ric Carrott's Ross. After failing to seduce his girlfriend (played by Rainbeaux Smith), who won't go "all the way," he tells her, "I love you but I can't take this anymore ... I'm not mad—*I don't know what I am*." Although the character is secondary to Buck in the picture, one does get the impression that the relationship between Ross and his male friend is more comfortable for him than the pathetic fumbles that he has with Smith. Although it doesn't really add too much to his character, the possibility of his homosexuality at least indicates that males have an expectancy to conform to masculine stereotypes (i.e., the all-conquering football jock) as much as the cheerleaders of the film have to pander to a level of accepted feminine beauty.

The Swinging Cheerleaders may not be as racially subversive as *Coffy* or *Foxy Brown*, but there is at least one sharp exchange of dialogue that indicates the noticeable generation gap between African-Americans of the 1950s and '60s and those growing up in the more liberal '70s. When Prof. Thorpe's wife catches on to her husband's affair with one of his students, she corners the girl (essayed by future *Playboy* Playmate Rosanne Katon) and states, "I spent my best years 'yes ma'am'ing' and 'no ma'am'ing' and 'yes sir' and washing shit off white people's babies." The woman then indicates that there is no way she is letting some spoiled, sexy little student run away with *her* man. It is quite a biting moment — a scene where someone who has come through the civil rights movement meets the generation that she paved the way for ... and finds a girl, college-educated, who is using her charms to steal her (Mrs. Thorpe's) husband. It is an astute piece of social observation from the film's two writers and, like the rest of *The Swinging Cheerleaders*, a fine comment on how the times were changing. (Predicting the Reagan era that was still to come, Prof. Thorpe even mentions that his ambition is to have enough money to buy a place in the Caribbean and take an early retirement: "Money buys happiness").

Watched today, *The Swinging Cheerleaders* is a throwback to a more innocent time and, as with *The Big Doll House* and *Coffy*, Hill once again instigated a small sub-genre that would immediately prove influential (titles such as 1976's *The Pom Pom Girls* and 1979's *H.O.T.S.* bear this out). For a sex comedy there are remarkably few laughs but the touch of the movie is so delicate that, even in spite of insinuated gang bangs and fleeting nudity, it is hard not to be seduced by its charms. By the end of the decade, cheerleaders would be used for far more sexually explicit gratification in the likes of *Debbie Does Dallas* (1978), but Hill's picture is something else entirely. Neither titillating nor edgy, it is instead just plain fun and driven by the personalities of actors that you really care about. Although the title may indicate far more deviant thrills, *The Swinging Cheerleaders* is one of Hill's most delightful movies. Moreover, the road to such hits as *Porky's*, *Screwballs* (1983), *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984) and other high school and college-set sex comedies begins here. Next time you find yourself looking at the latest straight-to-DVD *American Pie* sequel, remember that, inadvertently or not, the director owes at least some debt to *The Swinging Cheerleaders*.

Jack Hill's Memories of *The Swinging Cheerleaders*

Was *The Swinging Cheerleaders* your most financially successful movie due to your owning a piece of it?

Yes, for me personally it was— and it was exactly because I owned a part of it.

What changed in your business deals?

With *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* I was basically just an employee whereas with

The Swinging Cheerleaders I had a fairly good percentage of the profits. I had 25 percent and it made a big difference.

A movie called *The Cheerleaders* had already come out by the time *The Swinging Cheerleaders* went into production. Were you aware of it?

No. I knew that there were some other cheerleader films but I didn't see any of them.

So did you think you were doing something quite original? Namely a sex comedy surrounding the fantasy figure of the cheerleader.

Actually my producer and partner John Prizer had the idea for the basic premise of the story. Then we got a writer friend of mine called David Kidd, who had done a lot of television work, to knock out a first draft so we had something to work with and plan—for a budget and so forth—and I then did a rewrite on that.

Are you proud that the movie created this brief popularity in cheerleader movies such as *The Pom Pom Girls* and *H.O.T.S.*?

Well, I don't know if I did. *The Swinging Cheerleaders* was one of a series of cheerleader movies and I think the *best* one, actually, because the others were really just awful. Plus there's some social commentary in there. Although it was John Prizer who came up with the basis premise. In the sixties he went out and marched against the war, married a black girl for a while and you would have thought he would be a real liberal but he actually comes from a right-wing home in Philadelphia. He came up with this premise about a girl who wants—and this was the Watergate era—to expose the male chauvinism and the way women are treated as cheerleaders, how they are treated like objects. Then she falls in love with the football player and then the hippy guy ends up getting beaten up by the football hero.

So why is the liberal, hippy guy the most dislikable character in the movie?

Well, it was more fun that way [*laughs*]. I mean, the whole thing was just making fun of stuff. But the real bad guys were really the Nixon types.

Right, although they don't instigate a gang bang with a drunk cheerleader the way that Ron the campus liberal does.

Well, I wouldn't call him a liberal, he was a nutcase.

He is a nutcase—albeit one who is printing liberal material and who happens to be a hippy.

Yeah, well, that is true, isn't it? There is an old saying, "If you scratch any radical, you will find that underneath all he really wants is a Porsche." I have it both ways in that movie. The bad guys are both the corrupt people and hippy screwballs [*laughs*].

Whatever happened to Jo Johnston?

I don't know what came of her. I thought she was very talented. To be

honest, I don't even remember if we had a casting director on that picture because I think John Prizer knew a lot of the agents around town. I can't remember where she came from but I interviewed a lot of girls for the film and I just thought that she was perfect. I don't actually remember what she had done before that but she was quite an unusual type — not your typical Hollywood appearance — and she had a nice personality. I think she could have had a great career but she couldn't get her personal life together. I heard that she got pregnant from one of the actors on the film and yet she was also seeing one of the other actors. That is the interesting about acting. Sometimes when you are acting opposite someone, especially if it is an intimate scene, you want to get together with them in real life. That is what I heard anyway. It was the same guy she did the sex scene with.

Colleen Camp is the only one of the cheerleaders who doesn't do a nude sequence. Was she opposed to it?

No, it wasn't a problem. There wasn't an occasion for it in the script. I didn't want to write something just for the sake of a nude scene and in her case the character just didn't have a reason for it.

Rainbeaux Smith was already becoming something of a B-movie queen by the time of *The Swinging Cheerleaders*. Were you aware of her work?

No, I really didn't know what she had done. She just came very highly recommended as being reliable, and that is very important. When you are using actors that don't have a lot of experience, then you are really taking a chance because you do not know what is going to happen to them when you begin to prepare the movie. I have worked with really great actresses who could have excellent careers but they couldn't get their personal lives together. Roberta Collins is one example of that — she would be fantastic one day, do everything right, and then she would be out until 4 A.M. partying and the next day she would be useless. I've seen a lot of that. One of the actresses in *The Big Doll House* had personal problems too and once an actor gets a reputation for having personal problems and being unreliable, you don't want to take a chance with them — unless they really are some kind of tremendous talent. By the way, I just introduced *The Swinging Cheerleaders* at a special grindhouse showing and I didn't know it at the time but this girl came out later and told me that Rainbeaux Smith's son was in the audience. She was pregnant in the picture and her son was in the audience — so I'm glad I said lots of nice things about her before the film [*laughs*].

Jo Johnston's character, Kate, sets out to expose the inherent sexism in cheerleading but then comes to grow fond of the male gaze and the practice as a whole.

Well, it is a comedy! It is my Disney sex film...

Regardless, because the film is so in-your-face with this sexism subplot, it

does seem to indicate that the overall point of Johnston's journey is, ultimately, proving that women do indeed flourish when they are the object of male attention.

Well, I always like to surprise my audience [*laughs*].

In your four films previous to *The Swinging Cheerleaders*, black actresses had consistently been playing quite sexually provocative roles. It is the same in *The Swinging Cheerleaders*. Did you feel there was any typecasting going on there? The "typical" Jack Hill female, so to speak...

Well, Rosanne Katon's part could just as easily have been played by an Asian actress. But you are seeing things from a certain perspective and when you are in the position of making a film, you don't really think about it. You just think about making a good movie.

Let's talk about the scene with Ron the hippy and Rainbeaux Smith. We know that she gets gang-banged and we see the aftermath ... her face is all scratched up and so forth ... should we consider it rape?

I wouldn't really call it a rape.

Well, we are never told that she enjoyed it! In the aftermath of it, she is seen scratched up and barely able to walk...

Well, don't forget that the whole thing is her idea in the beginning.

Yes, but she is not given the character to protest when things go too far.

She is determined, remember, that she wants to have sex with a stranger — to lose her virginity to someone she doesn't know.

Yes, but not gang-banged.

Well, we don't know if she enjoyed it or not. She is just not like every girl — that is the comedy of it [*laughs*].

Do you think that can be seen as quite tasteless?

Sure [*laughs*], although I just got back from a French film festival where we saw three or four romantic comedies, made in France, where everybody is screwing everybody else and yet you are supposed to have feelings for the boy and the girl who are going to be the lovers despite the fact they are doing everyone else during the movie. Now I find *that* more demeaning to sexuality. Compared to that, *The Swinging Cheerleaders* is like nothing...

By the time *The Swinging Cheerleaders* was made, you couldn't bank on bare breasts getting an audience into the cinema anymore, right?

Well, no, because it was getting so commonplace. But by the same token it was also obligatory. It was what people expected.

Yet the film was a success.

Yeah, it was a huge hit, especially in Texas.

Did it play in any grindhouse, or inner city, theaters?

I don't think so. The grindhouse cinemas played movies long after the initial release, mainly so that they could rent the prints cheaply. When a picture is first released, you get mass distribution, open in 100 theatres, which my films did, so you didn't end up in the grindhouse places until a year or two later.

Out of all of your films, *The Swinging Cheerleaders* seems to focus on the male-female relationship. Can you talk about how much of your own personal experience went into that?

We just wanted to have three different types of characters but you are asking me about something that we honestly never thought about. We wrote the script in a few weeks, conceived the idea in January or February and then it was in the theaters by the end of May [*laughs*]. So in answer to your question, that wasn't something that I thought a lot about.

One thing the movie has in common with *Pit Stop* is that the masculine guys are the ones who get the pretty girls. But, looking back at yourself in the '60s and '70s, you were the very antithesis of this.

Well, that is just the fact of life. In the 1950s I played in a rock group on the road for a while and when you arrive in a small town for a six-week engagement or something, you are like a big star — even though you are not famous. The women tend to flock towards whoever is in the light, and their boyfriends get very upset about it, which is what I observed in those days. We used to make jokes, "The worse you treat them, the more they come after you," and that is perhaps a fact of life that people do not like to think about. To me, it just makes a good story — to use these kinds of elements and relationships.

You spoke a little about how quickly the movie got made. How did this happen?

The picture was green-lit, and even had a release date, before we started on the script. John Prizer and I worked out the story and we got my old friend David Kidd, who was very good with that kind of material and also very fast, to knock out a first draft. Then I took over and polished it. There was no way we could have worked that fast had I had to write the script myself from a blank page. Of course I made further changes on the spot, but not much.

How did you know David Kidd?

David got his start working for Aaron Spelling and wrote several successful movies of the week for him. I should add that the title was kept secret. The title we used on the script was *Stand Up and Holler*, so as not to discourage actresses or their agents from taking part in the project.

Why did you use female pseudonyms on the writing credits?

Because David was WGA and so was I and this wasn't a WGA contract picture. I recall that we figured that the idea that women wrote the script would

enhance the aspect of sexism that we were treating. I picked the name Witherspoon and John picked Conklin, but I do not recall why. We just didn't give all that much thought to the process, actually.

Did you have any involvement with Centaur Releasing, who distributed the picture?

No, Centaur was Frank Moreno—he liked race horses and bought a few from the profits of the film. And a Rolls-Royce, too. Unfortunately, I hadn't made that sweet a deal. John and I and another guy named Jeff, that Frank put with us to keep an eye on us, made up JJJ Productions. But at least I didn't need to pitch anything. Frank said with the title *The Swinging Cheerleaders* and my name he could get financing from the sub-distributors, and he did. From then on, it was in my hands. I think he approved the story, but that was a foregone conclusion; it would have had to have been way off for him not to approve it.

Now here's the thing: These movies were all making big money but you were not advancing to mainstream pictures. Why do you think this was?

Yeah, I never could figure out why that was. Some of my friends made movies that lost money but got good reviews and they went on to bigger pictures.

Some of the guys who came from Corman's stable like Coppola and Scorsese obviously translated their B-success into major movies.

Right, and Jonathan Demme ... I think he only made one picture that lost money. He got good reviews and he's a stylish director so he got to go on and do bigger pictures. I always had the idea that if you made movies that make money, then people would come to you, but it doesn't work that way in Hollywood. To make money is a fluke of some kind.

Producer John Prizer's Memories of *The Swinging Cheerleaders*

How did you first encounter Jack Hill?

I met Jack Hill through Frances Doel, who was working with Roger Corman as a production executive and story editor. Frances and I were good friends and I met Jack when he was doing his New World projects for Corman, *The Big Doll House* and *The Big Bird Cage*. At the time I was partnered with Vernon Zimmerman—he had done a project for Roger Corman and AIP called *Unholy Rollers*. I produced it, Roger executive produced it and Vernon directed it. While we were putting that together, Jack was beginning work on *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* at AIP and at the conclusion of *Unholy Rollers* I had a deal with AIP where I was developing on another picture. I had offices at AIP in the same area as Jack, we were close by one another, and inevitably we began talking and that is how I got to know him.

And how did this lead to you both working on *The Swinging Cheerleaders*?

The Swinging Cheerleaders was an idea that came from the distributor Frank Moreno. They already had a script, but it was useless, and after talking with Jack, I came up with the rough idea, which was a female journalist who goes undercover as a cheerleader to find out what cheerleading is all about. She is intending to do an exposé of the shallowness of cheerleading but instead ends up liking the cheerleaders—and she comes upon another exposé, namely the fixing of the college football games. The idea came to me because Gloria Steinem had gone undercover and written a [book] in which she had become a Playboy bunny and went to work at a Playboy club. I thought, "Let's do something like that but about cheerleading." That is where the idea came from and then one night I talked it over with Jack and we polished it. After that we brought in an experienced TV writer called David Kidd to write a new screenplay. Then Jack did a substantial rewrite, adding comedy and punching up the key scenes.

I didn't want to do a cheerleading film that criticized cheerleading. I thought that was: a) wrong and b) a bit too serious. Cheerleading is not a threat to anyone. It just struck me as an interesting idea. So that was the jumping-off point, but a project morphs and acquires a life of its own.

Was it a challenging movie to make?

It was actually the most fun that I have ever had on a movie, because you didn't have time for the usual backstage, backstabbing politics. It was just such a challenge to pull it together and do it and put on the screen the very best you could. It was a 12-day shoot and we rented a sound stage to move quickly between the interior scenes. Now, you really have to plot your every move carefully in order to do a 90-minute movie in 12 days. You have to really know where you are going and what you are going to do. Of the dramatic footage—the stuff with dialogue and actors—every single set-up that Jack shot ended up in the film. He planned it so that he didn't have to shoot a single additional set-up. As for the cheerleading sequences, Jack shot a lot of footage because he was going to cut it together montage-style. But for the dramatic footage Jack plotted it out so that every single thing he shot wound up in the film.

Were you involved in the casting?

Jack and I did it together and we had a guy called Geno Havens who was our casting director. He was very good, I think Geno found Jo Johnston. What he would do was bring us four or five people for each part, and we would pick the best or say, "Geno, we are looking for something different." The actresses we cast were all very young—and any time, if you throw the net wide enough and look at actresses between 21 and 28, you can get lucky and find someone who will go on to have a great career. I have kept in touch with Rosanne Katon ... Rainbeaux Smith sadly died ... and I see Colleen Camp on and off.

Jack speaks well of his time as a director on the films you produced for him. I presume this is because he had more of a financial stake in the projects and, perhaps, more to gain from them?

It was certainly a different set-up. On Roger's films, Roger is always the boss. When he chooses, he gives enormous authority to people — especially young people who are starting out. There is nobody else in my lifetime who has taken so many chances on people. Roger gave me the chance to produce my first film, but he was still the boss. Now, on *Cheerleaders*, Frank Moreno raised the money and gave it to Jack to make the film. Jack brought me in to be the producer, and I was both the line producer and the creative producer in the sense of working with the writer and the casting, but I was still working for Jack. We had a very good relationship, but there was never any question between what I wanted and what he wanted. We would always do what Jack wanted. We had issues we didn't agree on, but we never had a fight. So it was a different arrangement from working with Roger. Jack listens to the people he is working with.

Were you familiar with Jack's work prior to *The Swinging Cheerleaders*?

I loved *Coffy*. I went to the premiere of *Coffy* and it got a visceral reaction from a Hollywood industry audience which was astonishing. The screening had the African-American members of the audience on their feet cheering, putting their fists in the air, and that is very, very rare. So I was aware that he had tapped into something quite extraordinary with that film and I was eager to work with him.

Switchblade Sisters (1975)

AKA: *The Jezebels*
Jack Hill: Director
Writers: F.X. Maier (from a story by Jack Hill and John Prizer)
Cast: Robbie Lee (Lace), Joanne Nail (Maggie), Monica Gayle (Patch), Asher Brauner (Dominic), Chase Newhart (Crabs), Marlene Clark (Muff), Kitty Bruce (Donut), Janice Karman (Bunny), Don Stark (Hook), Don Marino (Guido), Helene Nelson (Cherry), Bill Adler (Fingers), Paul Lichtman (Mr. Clutch), J.S. Johnson (Principal Weasal), Kate Murtagh (Smackley), Bob Minor (Parker), Clint Young (Rizzo), Frances E. Williams (Haiti), Michael Miller (Hammer), Roy Engel (Jobo), Jerii Woods (Toby), Georgia Lee (Lace's Mother), Jack Lukes (Fred), Jeannie Epper (First Matron), May Boss (Second Matron)
Producers: John Prizer, Frank Moreno, Jeff Begun
Plot: In the near-future, gangs rule the streets, and in a rundown American city the top girl group is the Dagger Debs. Their closest companions are the all-male Silver Daggers, headed by a tough guy called Dominic, and the two

gangs commonly date each other. Dominic is attached to Dagger Debs leader Lace, a squeaky-voiced vixen who is handy with a switchblade, but when new girl Maggie comes on the scene, things quickly change. First Dominic rapes her, although with some consent from Maggie, and Lace's right hand girl Patch begins to notice his attention being diverted elsewhere. Installing a sense of paranoia in Lace, she convinces her friend that Maggie is a threat to the current hierarchy of the Dagger Debs and likely to steal Dominic. In response, Lace tips off rival gang The Crabs about a Maggie-planned infiltration on their local Friday night hang-out and the resulting shootout sees Dominic killed and Lace, who is pregnant with his child, injured. With Lace out of action, Maggie takes over the group's leadership and changes their name to The Jezebels. Her first course of action is to take revenge on The Crabs. The returning Lace has other things in mind — mainly making sure that Maggie's life comes to a quick and unexpected end.

About the film: "Sooner or later a woman is bound to find out that the only thing a man got under his belt is clay feet"—*gang leader Muff (Marlene Clark*). It's a feather in a moviemaker's cap to produce five movies in a row that make money but by the time of *Switchblade Sisters* Jack Hill managed to achieve this feat. Even so, his name remained virtually anonymous and his pictures never broke through to mainstream acceptance. Meanwhile, many of Hill's peers from his Corman days, including Peter Bogdanovich, Francis Ford Coppola and Jonathan Demme, had jumped into the A-list by the time *Switchblade Sisters* began to roll. Yet, perversely, the early pictures of these filmmakers — such as Demme's *Caged Heat* and *Fighting Mad* (1976) and even Coppola's *Dementia 13* (1963) — are considerably less well-known than *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* and possibly even less acclaimed. Nonetheless, the fact remains that Hill never did carve out the Oscar-approved career of his peers or land a big studio gig.

For Coppola, his success was more than likely down to proving that he could tackle serious, adult, mainstream themes (beginning with 1966's *You're a Big Boy Now*) whereas Demme got his props with commercially minded dramas such as *Last Embrace* (1979) and *Melvin and Howard* (1980). Bogdanovich is a stranger case, having somehow gone from the low-budget tomfoolery of his admittedly accomplished *Targets* (1968) to the outstanding melodrama of *The Last Picture Show* — but the fact that he wrote such a mature screenplay for his 1972 Oscar winner may have comprised half the battle in getting it made. At least on the surface, however, Hill did not appear to be chasing such a personal vision; instead he seemed to journey into the projects that were offered to him and then tried to make his own mark within a genre effort, be it blaxploitation, horror or a cheerleader sex comedy. While Hill's ability to personalize these pictures is an admirable, and enormously underrated, skill, it is also what no doubt stopped him from leapfrogging into bigger productions.

Switchblade Sisters was yet another change for Hill — a girl-gang movie, a genre that dated back to such teenage rebel movies as *Reform School Girl* (1957)

Jack Hill directs Monica Gayle, as Patch, in *Switchblade Sisters* (1975).

and *High School Hellcats* (1958) as well as the grittier biker-chick flicks that surfaced in the sixties (most notably Russ Meyer's fondly remembered 1965 hit *Faster Pussycat Kill! Kill!*). The lineage of *Switchblade Sisters* can certainly be traced back to this tradition of showcasing violent, female energy, wherein the celluloid actresses typically possessed more spunk than their hapless male co-stars. However, whereas the Meyer film, and even the more primitive Herschell Gordon Lewis offering *She Devils on Wheels* (1968), showcased women firmly in control of their own destiny, Hill's picture is more complex. Although it would be easy to single out *Switchblade Sisters* as a more regressive portrait of womankind, the movie instead stands as a document of females gaining their strength through gradually throwing away the shackles of male control and domination — the very things that they are, at least initially, answerable to. That said, this does make the film's first reel genuinely disturbing since it features arguably the most politically incorrect scene in any Hill picture — Joanne Nail's Maggie is raped in her own house by gang leader Dominic.

Hill demonstrated an interest in male-female sexual relationships and the way in which both sexes can dominate one another (and even ruin each other's lives) from as far back as *Mondo Keyhole*. He also teases at the appeal of virginal innocence over a male in *Spider Baby*'s subtly erotic sequence in which Jill Banner seduces Quinn K. Redeker. In each of Hill's subsequent pictures the male-female dynamic has never been cut and dried and women are just as likely

to use their sexual prowess in order to attain their goals (as seen in *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*) as they are to be controlled by a desire for male approval (such as in *The Swinging Cheerleaders*). Yet, whereas the busty, statuesque figure and "lived-in" face of Pam Grier demanded instant respect, the women of *Switchblade Sisters* are far more petite. Hence, it is difficult to envisage the waif-like Joanne Nail battling her way out of a rape — which would be all very well if the sexual attack on her was shown to be a harrowing experience but rather she comes to hug, and even appease, her aggressor.

While Hill builds up her character's sexual vulnerability towards a tough, overtly macho male figure (possibly the father that she never had — Maggie comes from a broken home where any sign of masculine influence is negligible), it is still a troubling situation to watch. Certainly Nail's wonderment (and prolonged, even seductive stare towards Asher Brauner's Dominic when he attempts to smack her) does show that his dominance is not entirely unwelcome. Prior to scenes of lovemaking, Hill has a romantic fascination with the eyes of the woman — something that is in evidence prior to Jo Johnston's sex scene in *The Swinging Cheerleaders* and also Ellen Burstyn's first, longing gaze at the macho Richard Davalos in *Pit Stop*. However, in the case of *Switchblade Sisters*, it is Dominic's decision to break into Maggie's house, viciously slap her across the face and then begin his sexual attack that causes problems. Here the beautiful blue eyes of actress Nail, again a fascination for the filmmaker's camera, are not full of ravishment but rather filled with terror. Even before his assault on Maggie, Dominic first encounters the character with her wearing a skintight top (while bra-less) and short denim hot pants— and, in light of this, it is hard not to feel that we are supposed to believe that "she asked for it." Dominic himself even says, after raping her, "What are you so pissed for? You asked for it, didn't you?"[1] Maggie murmurs a feeble "I hate you" and then cuddles up with him in her bed. It would be all too easy to say that this attitude is symbolic of the time but after the trouble that *Straw Dogs* (1971) and, to a lesser extent, *Emmanuelle* (1974) encountered over such scenes (which the UK censors dubbed porno-rape), at least someone involved with *Switchblade Sisters* must have been aware of the criticism that this moment was going to cause.

Certainly, the rape sequence is problematic not only because it shows Maggie's ordeal to be something she eventually enjoys (she later attempts to win Dominic's further approval by taking on the dangerous task of stealing a rival gang leader's medallion) but because it makes our relationship with the character difficult. Female viewers will, most likely, hate her for not fighting back — let alone coming to embrace the man who slaps her and forces himself onto her. She goes on to become an archetypical Jack Hill female — a gun-wielding, strong-willed, badass leader. But even in her transformation from independent street girl to commandant of an all-girl gang, Maggie's motivating factor is finding out who sabotaged Dominic's plans to take revenge on the rival group The Crabs for the shooting of his brother. As such, throughout the movie

Maggie is driven, not by some kind of feminist independence, but rather a desire to satisfy Dominic, the "father figure" who not only raped her but whose gang thinks nothing of pimping local girls in the high school bathrooms. Thus, the idea that "by the end of the film the female characters have become women who are realizing their full potential and their autonomy from men"[2] is not entirely true. Even the final fight between Lace and Maggie, for supremacy of The Jezebels, stems from Lace's jealousy over Dominic's reverence for the new girl in town. Her earlier statement that she would "kill for that guy" comes true — even if she is slain at the hands of Maggie. It should also be noted that Maggie does share at least one trait with Pam Grier's Coffy and Foxy Brown (not to mention *The Swinging Cheerleaders*' Jo Johnston): She is not afraid to use her sexuality to get what she wants. In *Switchblade Sisters*, Maggie seduces the villainous Crabs; making him believe that he will get his wicked way with her. All the while, however, she is looking to rob his medallion. While this may be seen as praying on a "dumb" male's primal instincts, in the way that Grier did in her Hill movies, in light of Maggie's rape and subsequent attachment to Dominic her efforts at using her sexuality to her advantage seem remarkably foolish in the context of what has come before.

While the end of *Switchblade Sisters* does feature a bloodied-up Maggie screaming to the police, "You can beat us, chain us, lock us up — but we're going to come back," it feels like too little, too late. Her character has been difficult to empathize with because she is so regressive to the authority figure of Dominic — both sexually and socially — and when he is killed, his shadow still looms over her actions. This is something of a shame because Joanne Nail is perhaps the most delightful of all of Hill's performers. Arguably the most attractive female to have highlighted one of the director's productions, her natural, breathtaking beauty is offset by her believable onscreen toughness. Her initial confrontation with Lace's partner in crime Patch, so-called because of the eyepatch that covers her right eye, perfectly shows that the actress — in spite of her petite frame — can swipe a switchblade, and grit her teeth, with the best of them. Perhaps this is what makes Dominic's eventual domination over her so depressing.

Yet, Hill does create vivid, believable female characters in *Switchblade Sisters*. It would be a mistake to say that, just because Maggie's journey is hardly that of a feminist ideal, the film itself wallows in an overriding sense of misogyny towards its women. Rather, the director lets his actresses eat up the screen — including Lace, the Othello character to Patch's Iago (who instills jealousy in her best friend after her own position in the Dagger Debs is threatened by the arrival of Maggie). Alongside *The Swinging Cheerleaders*' Jo Johnston, actress Robbie Lee is another one-hit wonder in Hill's filmography — a talented performer who appears to have dropped off the face of the planet. Her turn in *Switchblade Sisters* is simply incredible — biting and growling every word and spouting such tough lines as, "People just stomp on you if you ain't got no

In the final scene of *Switchblade Sisters*, Maggie (Joanne Nail) tells off the police (the officer is an uncredited extra) as she and her friends are arrested after she killed her rival in a knife fight.

muscle behind you. Everyone's gotta be in a gang." Lace's journey from adolescent bad girl to a paranoid, reactionary shell of her former self is brilliantly portrayed — especially when compared to Maggie's simultaneous, belated rise to gang leader. This is not to say that Lee steals the show from Nail — but it is to Hill's credit that he wrote such vivid parts for women and created a movie around them. Even in spite of the misogyny directed towards the female characters from the male gang members, there is an inherent power in seeing so many actresses on the screen, giving it their all and fleshing out some intriguing personalities.

Just as Maggie and Lace are played against one another, Patch and Donut also go on a journey during *Switchblade Sisters* although, ironically, both are far more liberated and considerably less conformist than either of the main characters. Whereas all Lace really wants is the chance to settle down and have a child with Dominic (hardly kicking against the pricks), Patch and Donut are made of sterner stuff. Neither, for instance, craves — or seems to want — male attention, with Donut (played by Lenny Bruce's daughter) under pressure to

Kitty Bruce, left, Jack Hill, Joanna Nail and Janice Kerman on the set of *Switchblade Sisters* (1975).

lose weight but, ultimately, not caring about it. She is evidently her own woman and, from Lace's frequent bullying of her, one gets the impression that there is some inherent jealousy—perhaps a desire to be as carefree as Donut and less ruled by body politics. Patch, on the other hand, gives off a subtle air of sexual attraction towards her best friend, trying to cause trouble largely because she sees Maggie as a threat to her relationship with Lace. "She's nailing your man and everyone's laughing in your face," Patch tells Lace, trying her best to create an evolving, all-consuming sense of paranoia in her friend. Yet Patch, in all of her bitchy, two-faced glory, is something that neither Maggie nor Lace is. She is independently minded, scheming and looking out solely for her own interests. She has much in common with the profiteering, authoritarian Dominic and his right hand man Guido, the thugs who pimp out girls, extort local shop owners and control the turf at their high school. Patch is in this game for herself—and her interests effectively boil down to Lace and being a real, scummy, violent street urchin ("I lost an eye for this gang," she bellows at one point); she is the real lone figure of the movie and, along with Donut, the sole gang member who exists without any male authority.

Just as *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* showed that the fight against drugs—and a system that existed to keep black people in the ghettos—would begin from the

street corners, so too does *Switchblade Sisters* reveal that the real forward-thinking comes from the ethnic area of the film's city. Thus, when Maggie turns to an old gang of African-Americans, led by Marlene Clark's Muff, her character is put into proper perspective. After an hour of watching Maggie fall for a hapless, misogynistic thug and even go so far as to do his dirty work, a gang of real badass females show up. "No men?" asks Maggie as she explores Muff's hideout; she is told, "Cowards. We kicked them out. You know, sooner or later a woman is bound to find out that the only thing a man got under his belt is clay feet." Revolting against The Crabs, a gang that hooks local kids on drugs and then forces them to carry out "jobs" in repayment, Muff's group believes that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun."

Certainly, despite Hill's proclaimed disgust at the work of such right-leaning Hollywood notables as John Milius, he also frequently features characters overcoming the odds of a decadent authority figure via firepower. Whereas Milius does not condone gun use in the slightest (quite the opposite in such comically repugnant directorial efforts as 1973's *Dillinger* and 1984's *Red Dawn*), Hill is equally guilty of, if not portraying a fetish for firearms, then showing that justice can be served via a healthy doze of bullets. While this may seem fascist, it is also worth stating that, unlike the cod-seriousness of something such as *Red Dawn* (or the Milius-penned *Dirty Harry*), there is a cartoon atmosphere to Hill's work that never makes the use of guns feel too offensive.

Even in *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*, the director's two most violent pictures, scenes of brutal violence mix with over-the-top plot points, comic book characters and set pieces that are almost fantastical in tone. The same is true for *Switchblade Sisters.* The shootout at the finale does not feel as if firearms are being justified as the means to an end. Rather, the feature's desperately violent characters, existing in a futuristic society bereft of any authority, take over the streets with force. In its own strange way, therefore, *Switchblade Sisters* hints at a Castro-like revolution taking place on the streets of America, where the youth are so disillusioned, not to mention financially poor, that violent action is the only option. This is perhaps best borne out by something we see in the hideout of Muff and her gang: a poster of Chairman Mao, mention of a "revolution" and the statement, "Mao says don't waste time on personal grudges." For Muff and her group (who label gang leader Crabs "a capitalist gangster"), the city really has become a war zone. Unlike Maggie and her more feeble reasons for wanting to take action (the death of Dominic), there is a far bigger picture. As with *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* before it, the drug-addled, anarchistic streets of *Switchblade Sisters* are seen as a war zone that needs to be battled from within (the movie's police force is portrayed as useless). Hill also shows that a wasted youth, whether male or female, with nothing to look forward to, will turn against authority. "I don't care if you blow each other's brains out—but if somebody clean gets hurt, I'll squash you," the police chief tells Maggie, clearly reflecting how much of a priority the film's adolescents actually are.

Although Hill does not portray "wasted youth" as profoundly as, say, *A Clockwork Orange* (1971)—a movie which has obvious influence over *Switchblade Sisters*—it is especially evident in sequences where The Dagger Debs beat and rob a debt collector or where Dominic exerts authority over his terrified high school principal.

So, on the one hand, *Switchblade Sisters* is a strangely involving movie—Maggie and Lace, in particular, have a sexy, surly screen presence and, even if their characters pale in comparison to the real female drive and toughness of a Coffy or Foxy Brown, their respective journeys make for addictive viewing. Yet, all too often the film throws a curveball—be it the fat, butch lesbian warden (a stereotype best left in the time this movie was made) or Maggie's "pleasurable" rape—that makes it hard to defend. However, as with most of the director's work, Hill does create some wonders on a small budget, most notably fantastic costumes for his leads that instantly let the viewer know they are in some kind of comic book future. (The costume designer Jodie Lynn Tillen went on to work on such blockbusters as 1989's *Licence to Kill* and 1991's *Backdraft*.) Still, for as much as *Switchblade Sisters* is positively owned by young women, it is a shame that Hill did not bless his actresses with characters that would succeed in pulling the film out of the exploitation quagmire and into something truly fresh and subversive.

That is what could have turned a good picture into a great one.

Jack Hill's Memories of *Switchblade Sisters*

When *Switchblade Sisters* came out, it broke your run of commercially successful films.

Yeah, it was a big disappointment for me. Maybe it was ahead of its time, I don't know. But it did okay in some territories—just in most it didn't. For example, they expected it to do really well in New York but it didn't even make its advertising costs back there.

With a film like that, in those days, you would play in different territories because the people who did the distribution in those territories were the financiers. They put in a share of the budget for which they got certain rights for distribution. So it would play in one territory and then in another so that you would not have to make 1000 prints. Well, the first territory it opened in, it did not do well. So the distributor panicked and thought we needed to change the title—he had been getting some feedback from people who thought it was the old movie *Jezebel*. I didn't think that could be possible but, anyway, it played in a second territory before the title could be changed and it did pretty well. However, by that time it was too late.

What title did you prefer?

I always thought that *The Jezebels* was a better title for it because this was never meant to be a grindhouse gang story, you know? It was supposed to be

kind of futuristic and we were looking at it as a projection of the future — where the Nixon years were headed, you know? I saw it as a female *Clockwork Orange* but it was not advertised that way so people who would have liked that kind of movie never went to see it. People never got what they expected from it. But, oddly enough, the test screening that we did was very good and, more interestingly, when Quentin Tarantino re-released it, all of the test screenings came back with very good comments. So [Miramax] thought that they had a real winner on their hands but the campaign was very much like the original campaign — it still wasn't, in my opinion, right for the movie. But I felt that people would not really come out to see a 20-year-old movie with no stars anyway.

How did you come to meet Tarantino?

I met him at a screening. They were having an AIP retrospective and they were showing *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* and he brought some friends along to see *Coffy*. Then he came up in the lobby and he had soundtrack albums and posters that he wanted to get autographed and he was just so enthusiastic about the film and so complimentary. He said, "Man, your dialogue is great" and he quoted a line of dialogue from *Coffy*, which most people wouldn't have noticed but which I had given a lot of thought to, but I knew the guy was very astute and very sharp. Then not too long after that I got a call from Miramax and they wanted to license *Switchblade Sisters* for Tarantino's own company [Rolling Thunder] to release.

How wide was the re-release of *Switchblade Sisters* in North America?

It went out everywhere — they released it pretty wide. When I spoke to Harvey Weinstein, he thought that they should really go wide with it because the audience reaction was so great. He thought they had a real winner but people just did not go to the theater.

Can you tell me a little bit about casting the film? As with *The Swinging Cheerleaders* this was, once again, a movie without any name stars.

We had a casting director on that one, called Gino Havens, but there was an agent at that time who specialized in young actresses for these kinds of films. I don't know which of the players came through him but I think it was a lot of them.

Whatever happened to Robbie Lee?

She did voiceovers for a while, cartoons and stuff, but I have no idea what she is doing now.

Although you are not credited with the script for *Switchblade Sisters*, did the idea of a female spin on *Othello* come from you?

Oh yeah, that was my idea. I had always thought that *Othello* would work with the reversal of the sexes — dealing with a woman's jealousy instead of a

man's and dealing with it in very much the same way. I didn't think that had been done and when the proposal came up to do a film about a girl gang, I thought that would be the ideal thing to do.

Did the critics at the time pick up on that?

I don't think so [*laughs*].

That is surprising considering how blatant it is.

Well, it is blatant if you know *Othello*. I don't know if the kind of critics that reviewed these films were quite so familiar with Shakespeare. You're a Brit, remember. Quentin Tarantino told me that he thought Patch was the best screen Iago, which I thought was going a bit far [*laughs*].

Did Robbie Lee have any problems with her nude scene?

No, Robbie was very much in shadow. In fact, she wanted a mirror put up and she had an agent there to make sure not too much was being shown.

Do you have any regrets about the rape scene in *Switchblade Sisters*? It is very politically incorrect when viewed today in that Joanne Nail comes to embrace her attacker.

No. You see, with the scene in *Switchblade Sisters* it wasn't just a gratuitous thing thrown in. It was very carefully set up that these people are playing by the rules of their own game that the rest of us don't have in our lives. It is very carefully set up in that one scene where he [Dominic] is reading the letter from his girlfriend and in that one moment they have this meeting of the eyes that sets the stage for that. Her resistance is kind of obligatory. That is the way that I saw it, anyway, and I have seen that happen in real life.

Can you tell me about it?

It was in Hollywood and while I was not a participant I was an observer. Also, when I was in the Philippines there was an old woman there who was the wardrobe lady and she said "It is awful unless it is someone you want to rape you." Then she just giggled and laughed and while that is not politically correct, it is probably a fact of life. When I did a screening of *Switchblade Sisters* and was on stage afterwards, this girl got up and yanked the microphone out of my hand and began screaming about the assault and everything. I thought "She protests too much" maybe...

Although in *Foxy Brown* the rape scene is hideous.

Well, yeah, I'm not claiming rape is pleasurable — not at all. There is another clue to the scene in *Switchblade Sisters* — it is the bit where he rips open her blouse, and you see a little bit, and then she retaliates by ripping open his shirt. Now that is not an invitation — you get it right there. They are playing a game with different rules from what most of us know but they follow the rules.

Did you ever see *Straw Dogs*?

No, never saw it.

The director of that film, Sam Peckinpah, got criticized for a similar scene.

Well, on that level you get into trouble for things that people like me could do really freely [*laughs*].

Is the rape what got *Switchblade Sisters* its R rating? There's not much violence outside of that.

Actually, one of the problems with *Switchblade Sisters* was probably that, with its R rating, people expected a lot of sex but there was little of that and very little violence. We actually planned for a PG rating and didn't expect the R. We only got that for the drugs.

Drugs are shown as the root of a lot of evil in your work.

I don't know. I'm especially neutral about them.

But in *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown* and *Switchblade Sisters*, they are seen as the reason that the streets are in such a mess and the poor are kept in ghetto areas.

Well, in the nature of the story, yeah, they are evil — but it is a little different when you are dealing with people who are ruining other people's lives by drawing them into that world. That is very different from people who will take out a joint and light up.

Can you tell me about directing the scene in the roller skating rink where Dominic is shot dead?

It was funny because I directed the scene on roller skaters. I had heard that John Huston, when he was doing his Civil War movie *The Red Badge of Courage*, directed it on horseback because it was something he always wanted to do. So I thought, "I really want to direct a film on roller skates." It was no problem, that scene — everybody knew how to skate.

The final battle — where was that done? It looks like a studio set.

Yeah, that was shot on a lot. The same studio where they shot some of *Gone with the Wind* — I forget the name of it but it is in Culver City. We could not have done that scene on a location, it would have been too difficult to do it. We shot that entire final battle in one day but I wish I had more time and more money to spend because then you would've seen some *great* fight sequences. It was a tight budget.

How did the budget of *Switchblade Sisters* compare to what you had done before?

The AIP pictures were much more expensive, and my next movie *Sorceress* was far more costly than either.

Did the name of the film's gang — The Dagger Debs — come from the girl gang movie *Teenage Gang Debs*?

Not from me — Fran Maier came up with the Dagger Debs moniker so no homage intended.

Why is the film set during a garbage strike?

I just wanted to show what I projected to be the economic and social deterioration brought about by the policies of the Nixon administration, somewhat futuristic, but kind of an in-joke.

Why did you quote from Mao's red book?

I thought it was funny. I wanted to have these revolutionaries a bit like Keystone Cops and I thought that having them waving Mao's red book and quoting lines from it was just funny. But that is what got the film banned in Indonesia.

Joanne Nail's Memories of *Switchblade Sisters*

Tell me a bit about your performing background prior to *Switchblade Sisters*.

I was actually working in New York at the time. I was doing some Broadway shows there and I had come out to Los Angeles. One of my agents said that I needed to get some experience in film. I was told, "This is a film and television town." So I went up for the part in *Switchblade Sisters* thanks to my agent — he told me, "This is a really great role for a woman — it is quite a departure from what else is out there." It was quite an interesting audition because there were lots of things we had to do. A lot of the castings for women were quite aloof but you had to be good for this part.

Did you know about Jack Hill's work prior to the *Switchblade Sisters* audition?

Yeah, I knew about him. I knew of *Spider Baby* and *Coffy*. Those were a little bit before my time but he was well known in that genre so it excited me to go up for one of his parts. He had told me that he had taken some of the things in this film we were doing from Los Angeles police files. Gangs and bad neighborhoods and other things that were happening at the time.

How did you find Jack as a director and a person?

I thought there was quite an interesting contrast between the films he made and the kind of person he was [*laughs*]. He seemed very intellectual, sensitive, soft-spoken and artistic but also quite witty. He had a wonderful sense of humor, very dry, and when we began filming, we did more than was even on the page. There was a lot more humor in the scenes and that is what I always found interesting — he pushed the envelope a bit with his characters. The movies that he had done before were over the top, in an interesting way, but what I liked so much about this is that there was a lot of tongue-in-cheek humor in the roles and the women were empowered. My particular part was also extremely interesting — I thought that there were a lot of levels to it. Jack was great and he listened to all of our ideas. He told someone that he wanted to choose very fine actors with good backgrounds in stage as well. He really

respected the input he got from us because it wasn't as if we were green — most of us had been onstage or done TV or movies. We knew we had a schedule and we didn't have much time to get into the layers of these different characters. Jack has so much going for him. He is so schooled in the arts and so his films have a certain rhythm to them. There are counterpoints and you can really analyze his work.

Coming from a theatrical background, did you pick up on the fact that Jack was using *Othello* as the basis for Patch and Lace's relationship?

Being the intellectual that he was, Jack told us that, but I studied Shakespeare in New York and performed it there. I also did *Othello* in Los Angeles and I am a lifetime member of the Lee Strasburg studio. But, yeah, we would always talk about that before we went into some of the shots. The interesting thing is that it wasn't totally obvious but once we started playing the parts, there was a lot of rhythm to the film. At the time this wasn't just a shallow part for a woman — it wasn't just for someone who could look good in hot pants [*laughs*]. It required a lot of acting and depth, strength and power — but with a sense of vulnerability.

The best thing about *Switchblade Sisters*, for me, is how your character is played against Robbie Lee's Lace. As she begins to fall from grace, you gain more and more strength.

Yeah, issues were certainly at work with my character and with Robbie's too and that made for a good counterpoint between us. I think it was ahead of its time but, there again, Jack had been giving women a chance to show their muscle in the Pam Grier films. In this case we were trying to kick out the men because the gang member across the town, Crabs, he was trying to get the young people hooked on drugs through a free food program or something and that was actually happening in America back then. Jack brought that to light — he showed that things like that were going on in really bad neighborhoods. He had an ability to make an interesting story around all of that and give us all of the tools to beat our adversaries. That was actually the most interesting part for me because we could shoot real guns. There was this real anger underneath all of it because all of our characters were from broken homes or had some really bad stuff happening and we were trying to protect the turf and protect our younger brothers and sisters from Crabs and his cronies. Plus, we were able to get rid of the men when we found out that they were no good to us any longer. We had to take over and help the situation because they weren't doing anything but, of course, violence being the answer is not really the answer — just in the film's bad neighborhood, that is how things act out.

You're talking a lot about female empowerment but your character is raped and she embraces her attacker. Did you have a problem with that?

Yeah, I did have a problem with that part. A lot of people have asked me

that question. With women's rights and everything else, this was not in keeping with the idea of the movie and what we were all about. But it was also a point of reality. This is how some of these guys would try and run over a woman — by forcefully placing themselves in a situation where they could overpower her. If you look back at Shakespeare and *The Taming of the Shrew*, she doesn't get raped but she is abused by her counterpart to calm her down. Unfortunately, because of their lack of education and knowledge and protocol, this is how these people in *Switchblade Sisters* act. They are very, very base in how they get rid of their emotions and so on but even still, that whole rape thing ... there was no way I was going to like that guy. There was flirting going on, and he was trying to come on to her, but she didn't have any love for that guy. Even at the end. The Iago character, Patch, she is always the person who is going after Lace and telling her that I am trying to take her man but that is never what is happening. That is why the film was compared to *Othello*, it is a tragedy in that I am never honestly portrayed. The Iago character misinterpreted all of my actions to Lace and subsequently never trusted me because underneath all of that, there was an indication that there might be a love between these two women. That happens with high school girls, you know? It may not be anything obvious— rather just "two's company and three's a crowd." Plus there was a respect that Maggie gave these girls— they liked the way I treated them because I treated them with compassion. We were always kicked around by the guys and there is a time, as you know, where I kick the guys out after Dominic gets killed and that is a very special moment of empowerment. But, like I said, Jack was ahead of his time — these were things that weren't really happening at the time. I mean, if you look at *Charlie's Angels* and the remake of that, it was very much the same.

Right, although the *Charlie's Angels* remake had a scene that also made me very uncomfortable — it is where Drew Barrymore has sex with the same guy who wants to kill her. Now that isn't quite as troublesome as *Switchblade Sisters* but it still did not sit well with me.

I think that it is a horrible, horrible message to the public and it should not be dealt with too much. It was within the culture and even within that, Maggie was rebellious. If you look at my character and where she comes from, her mother is having relationships with the landlord to prevent us from being evicted. So you look at where these people came from — the women have all come from broken homes and it is a survival thing, really. I would call it a method of survival and through history that has happened — and, yes, it is not a good message. But I think that there is always this rebelliousness and anger underneath Maggie as she tries to survive, even when she is in jail and stuff. That instinct is what allows her to function.

You were in your late 20s when you did *Switchblade Sisters*. Did you find it challenging, playing a teenager?

Now you are taping me on this but a woman is never supposed to tell her age...

It is actually on your IMDb profile.

I don't know who did that [*laughs*] but I did look a lot younger than what I was, and actually, it wasn't a challenge. I mean, if you look at the Dom character, it is like the Fonz from *Happy Days*. You wonder, "Is this guy ever going to graduate?" You know? I mean, it is hysterical — it is like they take one credit a year or something. But I felt very fortunate because I did look a lot younger and I was a few years older than the character. But it worked and this is how my career actually got started in New York because I had done ingénue parts and I had already taught school in Seattle. It was a blessing that I looked younger because I had more life experience behind me which gave me a lot more substance for the roles that I would play — whether it was in television or on screen.

Maggie is the most beautiful girl in the film. Do you think that is where the jealousy from Patch and Lace really comes from?

I think jealousy is a very big part of the film but looks? Interesting ... I will say this over and over again: I thought I looked okay but I never regarded myself as some kind of great beauty and that is the honest truth. Today it is different — people try and present themselves as very thin, and have eating disorders, but for me I was just always very active and I was involved with lots of dancing and lots of classes to continue my craft. But now, as a character, going into the film I think these characters were just jealous of this girl coming into their turf. They graffiti everything they own — even now you see that — but I was tough enough to handle the abuse from this gang from the get-go. You knew this girl had been around the block and had protected herself from other incidents. When I used that belt at the start of the film to protect myself — that was my weapon of choice, my character didn't use a gun or anything. She was the new kid on the block, she was attractive — although she never knew it — and she valued the friendship she had with these girls. She didn't want to take over, it is just something that happened. She was a thinking girl, she wasn't stupid — she had intelligence that they were intimidated by — certainly Lace was jealous of that. She was so afraid of losing her man, and so paranoid, those things played into her insecurities. So, yeah, I would say jealousy played a big part on a lot of levels.

What was your reaction to the costumes you had to wear?

I think that a lot of the time my costumes helped me and empowered me in my character and that was also the case when I was on stage in New York doing Shakespeare. The costumes would always help me participate in the role. I thought, for Maggie, that the costumes were racy and I loved wearing those high boots and running around in them. I was always short so these boots gave me a sense of being much stronger and taller. The denim outfits were very popular at the time and people were wearing mini-skirts — the ones you see in the

film almost look long compared to what you see now [*laughs*]. It is crazy but these things are still in style. I think the film set a fashion tone of denim, boots and metal — these things are still in play today. The '70s fashions are big and kind of retro today. All of those costumes made me feel strong and gritty.

What about the action scenes?

Actually, I have been a really good athlete all my life — I started skiing, I was a runner and so on. I have always been interested in doing action roles so this was just perfect. I loved all of the shooting sequences. We did our own stunts and the president of the Stuntman's Association, Bob Minor, was the choreographer of all the stunts but we did it all ourselves. It took us 18 days to shoot the film and it was heavy duty work. It was like 15-hour days, a lot of dialogue and a lot of action. It was a huge challenge when you shoot a movie like this which is action-packed with a lot of levels to the characters and I'm also in every scene in the movie. It took a lot of work but it was also fun to do your own stunts and to learn how to shoot a gun. It was like cowboys and Indians on the back lot [*laughs*].

Were you excited when Quentin Tarantino re-released the movie?

It *was* exciting. It shows that people are still interested. A lot of young people, students and film buffs were in the crowds and just a few weeks ago a showing in Los Angeles was packed. It is exciting because, at the time, this was very important to my career. This was huge for me, it was a big part — it was like a Sigourney Weaver type of role.

Would you share some memories of the supporting actors?

Yeah, they were all great to work with. Marlene Clark, who was the head of the black gang, was great. Chase Newhart [crabs] was so funny, the way he did his character. And the names were just great. Everyone was a lot of fun.

The film is, for the time, quite unusual in that the men are all supporting characters.

Yeah, and I think some of the lines were funny too. That is where Jack's intelligence really came in — there were lines that were thrown in so unexpectedly. There were some risqué moments in there too. My mother came to see the opening [which] was at Fox — they screened it on the lot. There were some scenes that she had to bury her head in her hands.

Would you tell me what scenes these were?

Well, yeah, the scene where I go, like the sweet little Girl Scout, to try and grab his medallion — that particular action. It gave me so many opportunities to be the innocent, sweet girl but also pretty angry and tough.

Finally, do you remember much about the film's original release?

I remember that there was a releasing company that had some money problems. I recall that at Fox it got a great reception. But I think that the right distributor never came along and the one they did have didn't market it properly.

They changed the name to *Switchblade Sisters*. It originally had been called *The Jezebels* and people kind of liked that name but I think they wanted to appeal to some of the gang area of towns that actually used switchblades. So I think they liked the name better because it had a certain ring to it. But it didn't do as much business as they thought it would. However, Johnny Legend had done some screenings of it even before Quentin came along and re-released it. I think Quentin really improved the quality of the print and then, of course, we had the re-opening of it and a big PR junket. I went to a lot of PR gatherings with Quentin and I really liked him. He had seen other films I had done and was able to quote my dialogue — that is how amazing this man is.

Producer John Prizer's Memories of *Switchblade Sisters*

***Switchblade Sisters* happened so quickly after *The Swinging Cheerleaders*— I am presuming that was because the latter was an instant hit?**

That is absolutely correct. *The Swinging Cheerleaders* was an enormous success and the investors made incredible money from it so they were more than happy to pony up more. Plus, Jack had a record [of hits] from before that, so he was not a one-shot wonder. Everything from *The Big Doll House* to *The Swinging Cheerleaders* had made money so he was the most commercially successful director in that particular part of the low-budget motion picture spectrum. So they were happy to provide additional funds and we actually developed several projects. However, the one that got the most traction was the gang film. Frank Moreno had said, "I think a gang film will make money." Jack replied by saying, "I don't want to do a gang film unless it is a girl gang because nobody has done that and at least it would be interesting." Frank agreed.

Now, at an early stage of its career AIP would commission the poster for a film before they would green-light the script. They would take the poster out territory by territory and say, "Hey Mr. Theater Owner in South West Texas, do you want this film?" And they would get a sense, by going around the theaters with the poster, what kind of thing they should make. After that, they would commission the script. Jack was going on vacation at the time. So I worked with Jack and Frank to commission a poster for a girl gang film and I put it on the wall of my office. Then I had writers come in and I would point to the poster and say, "We want to make a movie based on this and we want it in the theaters by the end of the year. What do you think? Do you have any ideas?" It was Fran Maier who really came up with the best ideas; he was a graduate of New York University Film School and the American Film Institute. He was reading scripts for the IFA agency which became ICM and CMA so he had experience. In addition to that, I knew some guys who had recommended him. He came up with the most original ideas, and when Jack came back from his vacation he had a writer to work with, and we had come up with a story. It was not like *The Swinging Cheerleaders* where I came up with a couple of ideas and

we ran with it; with *Switchblade Sisters* we had a series of conferences with Jack where we wrote stuff up in treatment form and used Fran's original ideas as a springboard. But working with Jack, it became a different story and that is the screenplay Fran went away and wrote.

For *Switchblade Sisters*, was the market still the drive-in theatres?

Yes, the particular economic model that Frank Moreno the distributor was working on was based upon drive-in theaters. Essentially, instead of releasing the film nationally, you would go out in one or two territories and then release it from there. Some of the investors were owners of theater chains and there were complicated deals going on—for example, instead of getting money up front, they would get the film for their theaters first and they got a certain split from the gross. The drive-in model, really, was that you opened in the rural areas and came into the cities last. For example, these types of low-budget movies only came to Manhattan if they were enormous successes and very often they never got that far.

Can you recall the difference in budgets for *The Swinging Cheerleaders* and *Switchblade Sisters*?

I would say that, roughly speaking, and remember that this is mid–'70s figures, the budget for *The Swinging Cheerleaders* was $165,000 and the production budget for *Switchblade Sisters* was $320,000. I think we shot *Switchblade* in 18 days.

What do you think were the major differences between *The Swinging Cheerleaders* and *Switchblade Sisters*?

Two things were different—*Switchblade* was set, without really saying it, in the near-future so Jack spent more time on a stylized design. I hired a still photographer to go out in Los Angeles and shoot what I would call scenes of dystopia. So we got back pictures of a dilapidated modern city and then the set designer and all of the visual people were brought in to look at them because this is the look we wanted. Then Jack wanted to shoot on a sound stage and that created an additional element of style. There was a more conscious attempt to stylize the look on a low-budget and Jodie Lynn Tillen, the costume designer, came up with some great ideas such as this black leather '50s look for one gang and a mod–Elton John look for the other. That was her description, by the way. We didn't spend any more money. She just made her selections with the intent to stylize everything. The cameraman, Steve Katz, also stylized a lot of stuff. He exposed all the film to sunlight for a split-second to heighten the contrast. And because it was an action film, we needed stunts and explosions. Bob Minor was the stuntman on both films, but on *The Swinging Cheerleaders* all he really had to design was the chase at the end. In *Switchblade Sisters*, however, there was the big action sequence with the tank and all of that, and Bob also had to design all of the fight scenes. When you don't have any money, you really have

to think out everything in advance. We also hired, as a second unit cameraman, Tak Fujimoto, who has since gone on to work with Jonathan Demme, and he was very talented. So, for a very low-budget film, we had a high level of visual imagination.

***Switchblade Sisters* was not as successful as *The Swinging Cheerleaders*.**

I am not sure why it didn't perform, but it certainly did not do as well as *Cheerleaders*. You see, we made a choice that one should always think hard about. We spent almost double on *Switchblade* what we spent on *Cheerleaders*. But *Switchblade* performed according to the norm for low-budget drive-in films, but it cost twice as much, and therefore it lost money. But it did get some good reviews. I remember that Paul Schrader reviewed it — although he hated it. But it always had a small cult following. However, the economic model for going out and doing drive-in films when you had no stars was to shoot it in three weeks and do it for $150,000. But we went out, having had a great success with *Cheerleaders*, thinking we could go out and break that mold — but we still didn't have any stars to justify the budget increase!

Why didn't you have a star? Even a B-movie name?

We had had a big success with *Cheerleaders* and thought, "This time we will add a little action to it and justify doubling the budget." We thought we were good, and Jack had had five hits in a row.

The scene in which Joanna Nail is raped and then embraces her attacker — did you have a problem with this?

I didn't have a problem at the time. I guess afterwards, when the film was revived, people have had a problem with it but I don't recall — at the time of shooting it — anyone thinking that questions would be raised about it. When it first came out, I don't remember anyone paying attention to that scene.

Was it the failure of *Switchblade Sisters* that led to you leaving the industry?

I didn't leave the industry. I just went to work in television, primarily on miniseries documentaries for American public broadcasting — PBS — where I'm still gainfully employed. But what happened was that shortly after *Switchblade*, the drive-in business ceased to be. By the end of the '70s it was gone. A whole bunch of distributors, producers and directors — who had made their living based on an economic model centered on drive-in theaters — could not make their products any more. It is an interesting thing to work in a market that has been booming for so long and making subject matter at a price, and drive-ins were dependent on subject matter — something that was easily identifiable from the posters, which had no stars and but was professionally made. At the right price, it would turn a profit. That particular market evaporated and the business arrangements all collapsed. Certainly the fact that we had made a movie that lost money didn't help things, but the market collapsed. We had been working off one model and that model no longer worked. Roger Corman, of course,

went direct-to-video which is the only way that particular low-budget subject-matter-at-a-price moviemaking model could work. Jack and I worked on some projects after that but they never got made. We worked on a script with David Kidd called *Tangiers* but that never happened.

Looking back on these two films, what is your main memory of this time of your life?

First of all, they were actually fun. They were fun to make and there were very few behind-the-scene problems. There was very little time and money, and it is best if you are devoting that time towards making the picture better rather than politicking. Major studio films do not always work like that. I think you had an unusual kind of freedom if you stayed within the genre that allowed you to explore issues, and I am not sure that you could find these opportunities in the same way today. We had fun trying different things and I have no regrets about it. At the time, these films were the low rent part of the filmmaking machine and there was not much status involved in making them but it was so much fun. Who cared what the movie establishment of the time thought? It is only during the past 15 years or so that cult followings have developed around these films and Jack's work.

The Scripts of Jack Hill

Three scripts, three flops and yet more broken promises. Hill's struggle with the film industry continued after Switchblade Sisters *with a trio of projects that could have redeemed his commercial reputation.*

After *Switchblade Sisters* underperformed at the box office, Hill found himself in a less than fruitful situation. With the drive-in cinemas disappearing, the director was losing the most common outlet for his productions and, to make matters worse, the major studios were beginning to deal with the type of content that, only a few years previously, would be considered far too risky for them. It says something when Hill's own *Switchblade Sisters* was actually inspired by the Warner Bros. feature *A Clockwork Orange*—a movie that not only contained explicit sequences of rape, sex and violence but which also nabbed four Oscar nominations. Whereas, in the past, it would be the success of underground pictures such as *Night of the Living Dead*, *Deep Throat* and *Easy Rider* that would inspire a more liberal approach to graphic brutality, sex and drug use in major Hollywood productions, now it was A-list filmmakers who were setting the standards for what was to come. Following in the wake of *A Clockwork Orange* were the likes of *Deliverance*, *Last Tango in Paris* (both 1972) and *The Exorcist* (1973), all of which earned Academy Award nominations, as well as the vigilante horrors of *Death Wish* (1974) and the kung-fu violence of *Enter the Dragon* (1973). The result sent the cinematic underground

into a tailspin because what these, and other, blockbusters indicated was that imagery which had previously only been depicted in grindhouse movies, or at the local drive-in, was now crossing over to lavish, studio-funded features. Consequently, when lead character Popeye Doyle (Gene Hackman) found himself addicted to smack in the hit sequel *The French Connection II* (1975), it showed that storylines, which would have been considered far too risqué even five years ago, were now acceptable — even when it was in the follow-up to an Oscar-winning smash. Some of the most prolific independent filmmakers, such as David Friedman and Radley Metzger, went into producing or directing hardcore fare (the one element of independent cinema that the mainstream was still loath to touch) while others, including Arthur Marks and Russ Meyer, called it a day and retired.

Although Hill had found success with *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown* and *The Swinging Cheerleaders*, they were still widely seen as "B" features— the sort of grungy, cheap, off-mainstream material that would appease young, inner city, thrill-seeking audiences. Ironically, however, the rough revenge theatrics of *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* had a great deal in common with Paramount's more vulgar, but hugely successful, *Death Wish* series— not to mention the *Dirty Harry* pictures, which reached new levels of graphic nastiness and conservative rhetoric with each episode. Moreover, Pam Grier's wish to "clean up" the streets of prostitution and drug use was reminiscent of Travis Bickle's mission statement in Martin Scorsese's masterpiece *Taxi Driver* (1976). Meanwhile, the bare breasts and jovial humor of *The Swinging Cheerleaders* would pale in comparison to the lewd and rude sex jokes inherent in the Fox release *Porky's* (1982)— one of the films that Hill's flick undoubtedly inspired. Even the streetwise grit and grime of *Switchblade Sisters* would soon look dated in comparison to Walter Hill's bigger budgeted, but thematically quite similar, *The Warriors* (1979)— which, with more money to spend, simply pumped the gang-violence up to ten.

Yet, following *Switchblade Sisters*, the director was at a bit of a dead end. Hill's brand of exploitation now looked somewhat quaint in comparison to the sight of the masturbating Reagan in *The Exorcist*, the psycho-sexual suspense of *Carrie* (1976) and the mature, frank sexuality of *Last Tango in Paris* and *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977). Moreover, like so many of his contemporaries, Hill had genre-hopped so much that he was virtually anonymous. As the director himself admits, "I had done several hit movies but nobody knew who I was so I just took whatever work I could get. I don't have any regrets writing the three scripts that I did because, looking back, I don't know what else I could have done at the time."

The first film that Hill wrote but did not direct was 1978's *The Bees*–helmed by Alfredo Zacarias, the Mexican B-movie maestro who would go on to make the notoriously dreadful horror film *Demonoid* (1981). Hill was disappointed not to be behind the cameras again. "I was always supposed to direct *The Bees*

but, on the first day of shooting, the producer told me that I wasn't allowed to make it because of union laws and he ended up doing it himself," he mentions. "That was bad news for me. I had gone down to Mexico, cast the actors and everything—I even did the rehearsals on the first day. It was just a total double-cross but I took some money to get out of it."

The Bees begins with a somber narration clearly designed to give the preposterous story some credibility. We are told:

> A few years ago, African honey bees were imported to Brazil. They bred with a local species, producing a new and dangerous strain that, without provocation, attacked and killed countless animals and scores of humans. These bees spread uncontrollably throughout the country. Each year the area infested by the killer bees grows larger and larger. At this moment, South America has been completely invaded. So far there are no means to prevent these deadly insects from taking over the entire Western hemisphere.

In other words, *The Bees* is an entry in the nature-run-amok genre that flourished in the wake of *Jaws* (1975) and which spawned such similar, sensationalistic wildlife-vs.-humanity flicks as *Grizzly*, *Rattlers* (both 1976), *Day of the Animals* (1977) and *Piranha* (1978). Hill recalls, "Irwin Allen was coming out with [the killer bee movie] *The Swarm* and he paid Roger Corman, who was distributing our picture, $200,000 not to release the film until after his was finished at the cinemas. They were scared because Roger had this reputation for doing those things cheaply and then cleaning up and they were afraid that it would spoil the market for their picture. So Roger took the bribe to hold back *The Bees* until after Irwin Allen's movie but *The Swarm* was a flop, whereas our producer did well with *The Bees* overseas."

The Swarm is not nearly as bad as its reputation suggests—and certainly far superior to *The Bees*, thanks to probably the most bizarre ensemble cast ever brought together by a major director (Michael Caine, Katharine Ross, Richard Chamberlain, Olivia de Havilland, Cameron Mitchell and Ben Johnson—who could boast about starring in the telemovie *The Savage Bees* as well!). Although the picture is dumb, hokey and, at times, horribly overacted, Allen takes no prisoners, his bees attacking families, infants and numerous recognizable supporting players. Indeed, as long as you can just "go" with the stupidity of the proceedings, *The Swarm* is a pretty decent example of big studio trash. In comparison, *The Bees* is a bit of a lame duck, with shoddy special effects (stock shots of true-life crashing airliners are even inserted into the picture, with some "bees" flying back and forth over the grainy footage) and the sort of ridiculous plot that even Ed Wood might have sneered at. The bees themselves resemble coffee granules added to water and then filmed up-close, a trick that Dario Argento would also use to depict swarms of insects in his 1985 flop *Phenomena*. In *The Bees*' favor, *Enter the Dragon* star John Saxon manages to keep a straight face, even when the script asks him to actually have a conversation (yes, *a conversation*) with the movie's lethal insects. Moreover, it is always quite

pleasing to see John Carradine, then in the twilight of his career, crop up in a small supporting role — one of many that he did during his final days as an actor, usually to add some credence to cash-strapped indie productions (see also 1980's *The Boogeyman*, 1981's *The Nesting* and 1982's *The Scarecrow*).

The Bees has some big businessmen looking to import the deadly African variety into the United States for a reason that is never really explained. Presumably it is to take advantage of their super-fast honey production, which is described in a lengthy prologue, but the men seem utterly shocked when the insects escape and begin to kill everyone. Saxon, playing a bee expert, releases a pheromone into the environment that has the male bees begin to try and mate with other males (yes, the answer is to turn the insects gay!) but the flying killers quickly become immune to this. The bees wake up Saxon and his girlfriend (Angel Tompkins) in their apartment and begin to speak to them, telling the couple that they must alert the United Nations about the state of the environment and ask them to take better care of the world. A passionate Saxon does just this with a whopper of a speech: "The Earth is being threatened by mankind — by our destruction of the environment and our pollution of the atmosphere.... Either we share this world with [the bees] or we vanish as a species." This baloney results in a reply of, "Good Lord, this chap's gone completely raging bonkers" by the British delegate but, before long, the bees crash into the UN itself and speak their mind. Saxon translates into English and the film wraps up with possibly the most insane happy ending ever put to celluloid. After all, you never did see Bruce the shark and Roy Scheider work out their differences over a cup of coffee in *Jaws*, did you?

While Hill says he didn't let the bees talk in his original script, he does mention that the director "shot most of the script as I wrote it" and he also takes the blame for the plot involving a pheromone that turns the insects gay. "I did some research on a pheromone that attracts bees to other bees and it was the release of that which would stop them from breeding," states Hill, who adds that the production was rushed because "the whole idea was to get this picture out in front of *The Swarm*." However, with lines such as, "Are you saying that this chemical of yours will turn the male bees into homosexuals?" and "They have been created by some electronically stimulated genetic mutation," *The Bees* at least manages to be good for a few chuckles. There are also touches of Hill's suspicious attitude towards big corporations with the occasional sharp line, such as a comment on the title critters ("Well, better a bit more aggression than lazy — that's the American tradition, after all") and the slimy businessman, partly responsible for trying to import the insects, pointing out, "This year we expect to see record profits" — while people outside are dying. Most amusingly, however, is the addition of some Cold War panic, the sort of thing that had already been done to death in such films as *Them!* (1954) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) back when the threat of a nuclear conflict with the old Soviet Union seemed like a very real possibility. Yet, some very 1950s

lines of dialogue still surface in *The Bees*, the best of them being, "The United States seems totally defenseless against this invasion." Quite.

The Bees is largely forgotten about and now nothing more than a footnote in the "nature run amok" genre. That said, it would have been interesting to see what Hill could have done with the picture had he directed it. Not only would it have represented a new kind of feature film for him, one demanding the sort of special effects expertise that he had never had to deal with in the past, but seeing one of history's most prolific B-directors teaming up with John Saxon would not have been without merit. It is also worth noting that Hill himself maintains that *The Bees* is the least-changed of all of the scripts that were taken out of his hands and directed/co-authored by someone else. As such, it is unfortunate to have to state that *The Bees* is also, by a wide margin, the worst of the three back-to-back movies that Hill had writing input on. It is a movie of such appalling stupidity, bad dialogue and redundant ideas that its current level of obscurity is guaranteed to last for as long as mankind exists.

Hill's next task was to write two scripts for Canadian producer Sandy Howard, whose previous work had included the popular Western *A Man Called Horse* (1970) and *The Devil's Rain* (1975), the latter famous for marking John Travolta's screen debut. The first of Hill's endeavors with Howard, *City on Fire*, was a disaster picture in the vein of the high-concept blockbuster *The Towering Inferno* (1974). Perversely, then, Hill had the task of once again writing a low-budget alternative to a major Irwin Allen–directed picture. "Howard was an independent producer who made a lot of money doing those kinds of disaster movies," remembers Hill. "He was the sort of producer who somehow made money from movies that flopped and I had an agent at that time who told me that Howard wanted to do a sequel to a big action-adventure picture that he had made and which they expected to be a big hit. They all thought it was a great movie — it was about this group of people in hang gliders attacking a bunch of terrorists who are occupying a monastery up in the Greek mountains and it had a pretty good cast — they had James Coburn as the star."

The movie in question is *Sky Riders* (1976), another '70s genre film that has largely slipped below the radar of everyone but the most dedicated B-movie buff. Suffice it to say that the feature was not the blockbuster that Howard had hoped for — although the end product is not without some low-grade charm. "They wanted me to write a sequel for *Sky Riders*," continues Hill, "and I pitched them my idea, which they thought was good, and I wrote the script. Well, it turned out that the movie was a big flop and no one could understand why. I knew why — it was because they had the theory that it should be wall-to-wall action and there is nothing more boring. So Sandy had the idea to do a disaster movie where a whole city burns up. I pitched him my idea and got together with a friend of mine called David Lewis, who was a very accomplished television writer; it really needed that kind of experience because it was going to have a big ensemble cast. It was the sort of thing they organized at that time to

assure that you got a big TV sale. So David and I collaborated on the script, I wrote the story and he filled in the pages of the screenplay and we argued [about] a lot over things but the script got done and Sandy Howard and his people liked it very much."

Unfortunately for Hill, his debut in the disaster movie sweepstakes did not go as planned. "I was ready to direct it but they got their financing from a Canadian tax deal so they needed a Canadian director and a Canadian writer," reveals the filmmaker. "So the new writer did a complete re-write on it. I have been told that the director Alvin Rakoff is a very nice guy but I thought he completely misunderstood the big climactic action scene. He was the kind of director who had done a lot of Shakespeare where he set up the camera and let the actors do their stuff, but this sort of film required someone who knew how to use the camera to make you think there are things there that you don't really see."

Rakoff's *City on Fire* is not a good film but also not a total washout. It plays like a television movie version of the aforementioned *The Towering Inferno*, with cut-price special effects, a less prestigious ensemble cast and a bargain basement set. The feature begins with the ominous warning "What you are about to see could happen to any city, anywhere," before unveiling its major players in a number of quick-cutting interludes. The leading man is cult character actor Barry Newman (from 1971's *Vanishing Point*), playing a doctor who remains in love with his ex-socialite girlfriend Diana (played by Susan Clark, from 1979's *Murder by Decree*). Diana is having an affair with the city's conservative mayor (Leslie Nielsen in one of his pre–*Airplane* serious roles), which attracts the attention of an obsessed paparazzi photographer. In addition to all of this drama, the script has just enough parts for some more recognizable faces to crop up in what amounts to little more than extended cameos. Thus, Ava Gardner has a largely fruitless role as a bitchy television presenter, James Franciscus plays her assistant in a batch of scenes that must only have taken a few hours to get done, Henry Fonda plays the chief of the fire squad and Shelley Winters grabs some lines as a hospital nurse. Unlike the big disaster hits of the '70s which also contained a number of star actors in the cast (including the aforementioned *The Towering Inferno*, 1972's *The Poseidon Adventure* (also featuring Winters and Nielsen) and 1974's *Earthquake* (also featuring Gardner), *City on Fire* does not really have much for Gardner, Winters, Franciscus et al. to do. While it must have seemed a good, commercial idea to attach as many famous names as possible to the picture, director Rakoff simply has them go through the motions, utter a few lines and then vanish from the proceedings. At least *The Towering Inferno* and *The Poseidon Adventure* actually used their big names to throw the audience a curveball and kill one or two familiar faces off. In comparison, the interludes which feature *City of Fire*'s big Hollywood stars only serve to bring the real action to a sudden, and frustrating, standstill.

Although his input as a director is nonexistent on the final product, there

remain some Jack Hill elements in *City of Fire*—even if he confirms that most of his original work was re-written for the final script. For example, the fire is begun by a distraught blue collar employee who is frustrated by his lack of success. Played by Jonathan Welsh, the character is an oil refinery employee who, when he politely protests a demotion, is shown the door. Angered and frustrated, and seeing the press coverage of the millionaire Diana—who began to attend his high school just as he was leaving—Welsh starts to randomly flip switches at the refinery, causing a leakage of oil into the city's sewage system. When some workmen create a spark, the result is a huge explosion that costs numerous lives—the script apparently indicating that a society which does not take care of its population is destined to have lone personalities with nothing to live for and, as a result, no reason to care about causing disruption. When one television reporter says to his boss that he doesn't like how close the fire is coming to where they are based, he is told to "just think of your pension." Hill says that "the whole basic storyline of *City on Fire* is still mine," and, when reminded about the film's Marxist undertones (not entirely unique for his work), admits, "I was a big fan of [John Howard] Lawson who was one of the Hollywood Ten and I liked his work a great deal." Lawson was blacklisted by the House of Un-American Activities Committee for being a registered Communist.

Hill's skepticism of political authority also shines through in the finished version of *City on Fire*. For example, Leslie Nielsen's mayor, who agreed with plans to build the refinery near the city's hospital, is seen as a money-obsessed sleazebag. "Never admit that you were wrong about the refinery," says one of the mayor's henchmen—with Nielsen in apparent agreement. Susan Clark's Diana, whose wealth is reinforced throughout the movie, is asked by Barry Newman's "good guy" doctor, "How does it feel to have bedded your way to the top?" In a sense, when the movie's unnamed city does end up on fire, it is almost as if the flames are acting as a cleansing agent, with the mayor having to fight for his life and work with his people to insure their survival. The disaster also brings Diana and Dr. Whitman back together, while the oil refinery, run by a cretin and seen as a consistent hazard, is blasted into bits. The character played by Welsh, who instigated the entire tragedy, is impaled under some falling debris—such is the genre's usual allusions to poetic justice.

Although it is easy to watch, *City on Fire* is far from memorable. Rakoff bungles pretty much every attempt at building up suspense and, even when the fire starts to spread, he frustratingly cuts to "comical" asides such as a man caught in a public bathroom when the lavatory doors collapse around him. Later on, as there is a rush to exit the hospital, the director cannot resist yet another bout of toilet humor: An old man asks Nielsen to hold his bed pan so that he can urinate. None of this is funny and it only seems deeply ill-placed in amongst the scenes of people struggling to survive and buildings engulfed in flames. Another scene of incredible stupidity has a bemused and flustered

Diana deliver a pregnant patient's baby, apparently because the hospital no longer has any doctors. The sequence drags on and on, pulling the viewer out of the action and city-burning theatrics that Rakoff should have been focusing on. As mentioned, the special effects are not on a par with *The Towering Inferno*, but nor are they a total fiasco: Matte work blends in with some stock footage, quick cuts, forced camera angles and decent models. However, Rakoff seems to think that shaking his camera back and forth can simulate the illusion of a mighty tremor in the ground. It doesn't and, when seen today, the movie seems incredibly dated.

Unfortunately for producer Sandy Howard, *City on Fire* was a bomb when it was released to cinemas. It may have been that audiences had simply had enough of the disaster movie recipe, with *Rollercoaster* (1977), *Avalanche* (1978) and numerous sequels to 1970's *Airport* possibly overcrowding the marketplace. (The same year's *Beyond the Poseidon Adventure* was also a box office disappointment in spite of its obvious name value.) According to Hill, *City on Fire* did make its money back in television sales. He is not particularly impressed with the final result. "I thought that *City on Fire* could have been a really terrific suspense thriller," he admits. "I think that the film had a lot of nice touches in it. It was half there but it didn't really pay off. It was greatly changed and totally ruined. I thought we could have had a really successful movie there and the proof of the pudding is that the film was a flop."

Not to be deterred, however, Howard continued to produce high-concept bombs, including another disaster picture called *Meteor*, which starred Sean Connery and had enough science fiction elements to suggest a cash-in on the twin hits of *Star Wars* (1977) and *Moonraker* (1979). Howard had more success partnering with fellow Canadian Harold Greenberg on *Terror Train* (1979), one of the first *Halloween* rip-offs and a minor hit following the John Carpenter-instigated boom in teen horror flicks. (Acknowledging the debt, *Terror Train* even features Jamie Lee Curtis as its leading lady.) The end result is perhaps most notable for launching the career of Roger Spottiswoode, who would go on to direct such major releases as *Turner & Hooch* (1989), *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997) and *The 6th Day* (2000). Obviously pleased with the success of *Terror Train*, Howard stuck with the horror genre and began work on 1980's *Death Ship* (initially called *Blood Star*) with the intention again being that Jack Hill would direct. Of course, this is not what happened; Alvin Rakoff would, ultimately, return to helm one of the 1980's most famous terror flops.

"David Lewis and I followed up with Sandy after *City on Fire*," recalls Hill. "He told us that he had a script about a ship that killed people but he wasn't too happy with it. I pitched Sandy a story so different from what this other writer had written that the guy didn't even ask for a credit. That is what would become *Death Ship* but, here again, they had to give it to a Canadian writer and the whole concept was changed. In my original script, the energy, the ghost if you will, from this terrible thing that happened on the ship during World War

II infects these people and they begin to take over the roles of the dead. It is as if the ghosts want to get revenge on the intruders. It is something that I had never seen done before and nowhere in my research did I come across any precedent for it. You know—that ghosts could possess people and force them to take on their personalities."

Nick (Nick Mancuso) fights to survive in *Death Ship* (© The Associates/Nucleus Films UK).

Hill obviously never encountered the Stephen King book *The Shining* but, this said, *Death Ship* seemed like a novel idea at least—something a little different in an era which was awash with gory *Halloween* spin-offs such as *Friday the 13th* (1980), *My Bloody Valentine* and *The Burning* (both 1981). As much fun as these pictures were, they were undoubtedly aimed at an audience in their teens and early 20s—in sync with the age of their lead characters. The dialogue all too often focused on youthful discussions of sex, drugs and dating. *Death Ship*, however, much like the same year's sleeper success *The Changeling*, starred older actors and sets itself up as a more subtle ghost story, far removed from the nuances of maniacs with machetes and terrified teen victims. This may have had something to do with the movie's lack of commercial success, although *Death Ship* stands up as an above-average example of the haunted house genre (which is what it really is, despite the mid-ocean locale).

Death Ship begins by introducing us to Captain Ashland (George Kennedy), an aging curmudgeon who has been forced into early retirement. Taking over from him is his former second-in-command Trevor Marshall, a father of two young children and a loving husband. They, along with a lounge comedian called Jackie (Saul Rubinek), an old lady called Sylvia (Kate Reid) and young lovers Nick (Nick Mancuso) and Lori (Victoria Burgoyne), are thrown overboard after their sea liner has a deadly collision with an old ship. Surviving on a raft until the morning, the small group hobbles aboard a deserted, rundown warship—unaware that it is the vessel with which they collided—and more trouble begins. Jackie is hoisted up into the air by a stray cable, apparently with a mind of its own, and then dropped overboard where he drowns. The ship subsequently begins to function, seemingly coming to life after inheriting the soul of the dead man. Captain Ashland begins to hear the

Ashland (George Kennedy, right) battles Trevor (Richard Crenna) in *Death Ship* (© The Associates/Nucleus Films UK).

voices of Nazi generals and ends up possessed by one. Sylvia eats an old sweet, no doubt dating back to the early 1940s, which turns her face into a monstrous, purple mess, and dies shortly thereafter. Lori takes a shower but the water is replaced by blood and she nearly drowns when the cubicle door won't open. Captain Ashland then throws her overboard. The nastiest death is reserved for her lover Nick, initially set up as the picture's hero, who drowns in a pit of dead bodies as the captain looks on. Marshall and his family make it overboard and are spotted by some passing helicopters. Ashland is not quite so lucky, however, and ends up being mashed in the ship's machinery. The "Death Ship" lives on to roam the high seas.

Despite confusing day for night on more than one occasion, *Death Ship* is a fine horror movie and delivers at least a couple of good, sharp shocks. Victoria Burgoyne's shower scene is especially memorable, and not just because the actress gets to show off her shapely physique; Rakoff manages to turn a rather superficial homage to *Psycho* into something quite maddening and claustrophobic as the poor girl finds herself drowning in a cubicle of blood. Likewise, the death of Nick Mancuso, in a pit of rotting bodies, has a wonderful "yuck" factor that would make even Italian gore-maestro Lucio Fulci proud. The final discovery that the old war vessel was used as a Nazi torture chamber,

complete with ghostly howling noises and closeups on some utterly disgusting corpses, gives *Death Ship* a cheap, but believably macabre, atmosphere. Although Rakoff resorts to some of his *City on Fire* tricks for the opening shipwreck (shaking his camera around, and the liberal use of stock footage), *Death Ship* is a far better picture all round. Watched today, the film positively oozes the air of a 1980s "video nasty" and—because of the Nazi undertones—feels really sleazy, in spite of its "restrained" use of graphic gore. Hill has found peace with the movie (on which he and David Lewis remain billed as co-writers), stating, "*Death Ship* does have its fans. I liked it a little bit better seeing it recently than I did when it was released in the theater. It was a flop when it first came out but it seems to have become a cult film now. The director had a few good ideas but I don't think that he had the budget to carry out what he really wanted." *Death Ship* would also have some influence of its own—namely on the inferior, but far bigger budgeted, *Ghost Ship* (2002), which also made no shame about ripping off its predecessor's poster for its own theatrical release.

It is difficult to spot any Hill touches in *Death Ship*; the movie plays out as a straightforward, schlock-filled horror picture. Even the characters—outside of scene-chewer George Kennedy's possessed sea captain—are all fairly cut and dried and, to be honest, bland. For Hill, the big problem with *Death Ship* remains that it is the actual sea vessel killing people. "It reminded me of that film *The Car*," he admits. "That was a terrible movie and also a flop, because you cannot have a car that kills people. There is no personality in a car or a ship, no bad guy or anything. I always said that the ghosts should possess people but then this new writer came on and it was changed back to the ship killing people." Nevertheless, in George Kennedy's delusional, murderous, possessed sea captain, at least some of the sprit of Hill's original vision lives on in *Death Ship*.

Sorceress (1982)

Jack Hill: Director (as Brian Stuart)

Writer: Jim Wynorski, Jack Hill

Cast: Leigh Harris (Mira), Lynette Harris (Mara), Bob Nelson (Erlick), David Millbern (Pando), Bruno Rey (Valdar), Ana De Sade (Delissia), Roberto Ballesteros (Traigon), Douglas Sanders (Hunnu), Tony Stevens (Khrakannon), Martin LaSelle (Krona), Silvia Masters (Kanti), William Arnold (Dargon), Teresa Conway (Amaya), Lucy Jensen (Dancer), Michael Fountain (Player), Peter Farmer (Armorer)

Producer: Roger Corman

Plot: The evil warlord Traigon wants to sacrifice his firstborn to the god Caligara (an oversized levitating head) in order to strengthen his supernatural

powers but, having had twins, discerning which came out of the womb first is a tough call; despite torturing his own wife, the answer is not forthcoming. Before any further damage can be done, Traigon is confronted by a brave warrior called Krona. With what is left of her strength, Traigon's wife slays her husband but — having three lives to waste — the warlord promises to return in 20 years. His twins are blessed with magical powers by Krona and brought up as boys by a village couple. Twenty years later, however, Traigon is back for vengeance, ordering his minions to find "the two who are." On the run, the twins meet a satyr called Pando, a Viking (!) called Baldar and a rugged barbarian called Erlick. The latter teaches the twins about their true gender, and more.

About the film: "See, Mira, didn't I tell you something was wrong?" — *Mara (Lynette Harris), realizing that her ample chest does indeed mean she is not a man. Sorceress* is still the last film to boast Hill's directorial involvement — and it was also his first chance to helm a film since 1975's *Switchblade Sisters*. Unfortunately, Hill did not bow out with grace: The feature is a mess, his worst effort since the lamentable *Mondo Keyhole*. Potential viewers should be warned that *Sorceress* is not even fun in a "so bad it's good" way. Instead, it is just boring — something that one would have every right *not* to expect from a Jack Hill movie, especially since he could turn even the tawdry, sexist *The Big Doll House* and *The Big Bird Cage* into campy, and quirky, cult favorites.

There are two things that the more seasoned B-movie connoisseur is likely to notice when *Sorceress*'s credits cheaply unfold over a plain black background. The first is that James Horner's score from Roger Corman's production of *Battle Beyond the Stars* (1980) has been recycled, presumably to save some cash. The second is that the screenplay is attributed to Jim Wynorski. Wynorski would later carve out a niche for himself directing largely terrible, extremely low-budget straight-to-video features such as 1991's *976-Evil 2*, 1994's *Ghoulies IV* and 2000's imaginatively titled *The Bare Wench Project*. To this day he probably remains most famous for giving former underage porn star Traci Lords her first legitimate starring role in 1988's *Not of This Earth*. *Sorceress* is credited as Wynorski's first writing job, and he would follow the project up by scribing a couple of moderately commercial efforts (1982's mediocre zombie feature *Mutant* and 1983's horrendous *Porky's* rip-off *Screwballs*). Interestingly, Wynorksi would later helm *Deathstalker 2*, a sequel to the original *Deathstalker* (1983), which Roger Corman embarked on after the mild success he had with *Sorceress*.

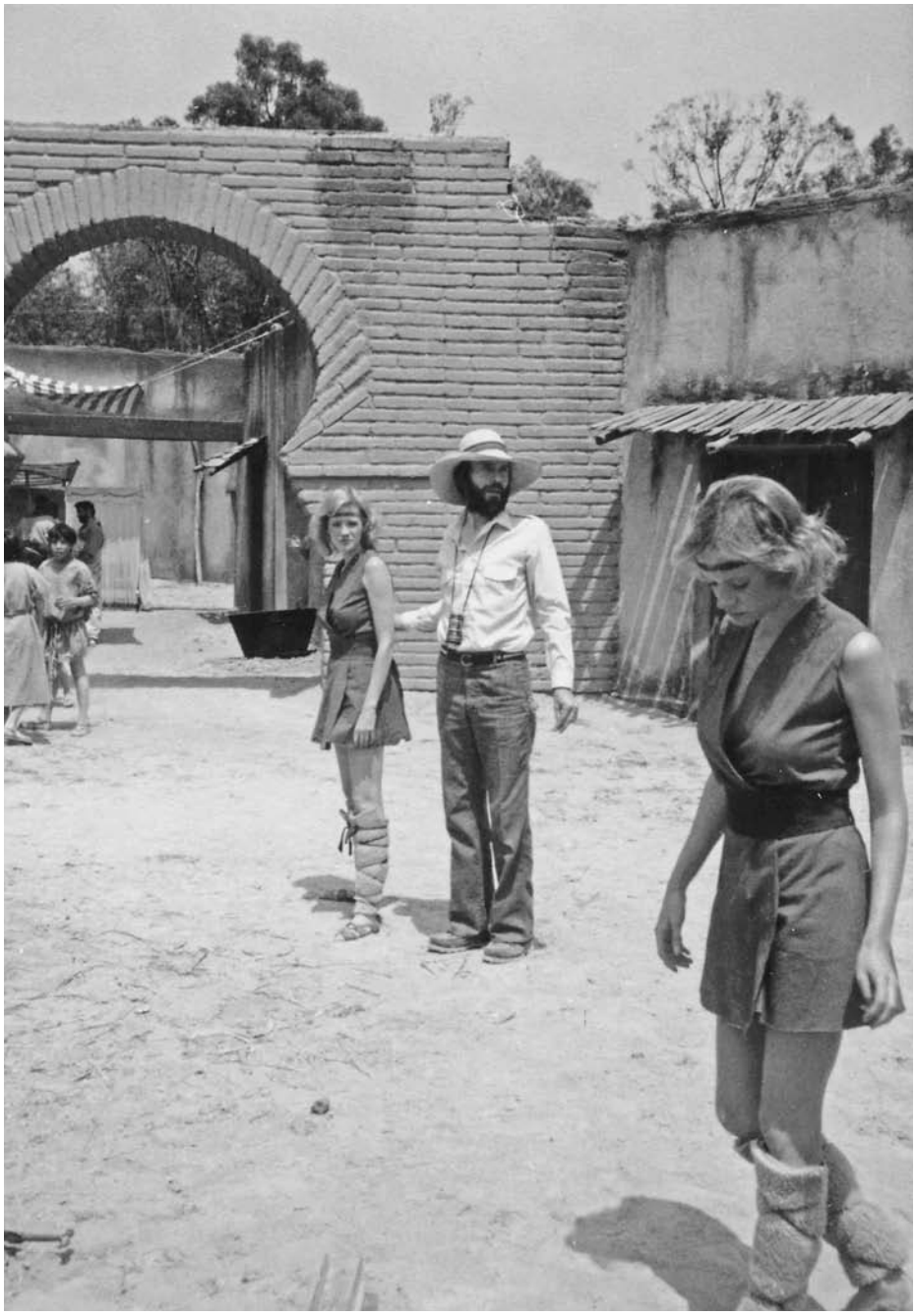
It would be easy to write off the script to *Sorceress* as being entirely the work of Wynorski but Hill himself takes credit for the screenplay (see the *Memorie* section of this chapter). *Sorceress* features little of the sharp dialogue that one might expect from the man who wrote *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* and there is no attempt at Hill's usual genre subversion. Indeed, the movie's story looks and feels tired and uninspired — and Hill's attempt to play the premise purely for

laughs is badly misconceived (especially considering that fantasy audiences had just been treated to such big-budget fantasy epics as *Star Wars* and its ilk, not to mention the period-set thrills of 1981's *Clash of the Titans*—whose success may have inspired this tawdry outing). *Sorceress* is also very short and, even by Roger Corman's often skid-row standards, very cheap-looking and badly acted. The special effects, which could have been the movie's one saving grace, are also disappointing, with only the last-reel appearance of a few decent zombies being anything to write home about. However, a lengthy description of *Sorceress* is essential for fans of the director given that—out of Hill's entire back catalogue—it is the only movie yet to be released on DVD. It is anyone's guess if we will ever see it on the market again.

Sorceress begins in what looks like a medieval land, although the time and place are never revealed to us. A sinister, bearded sorcerer Traigon (Roberto Ballesteros) intends to sacrifice a newborn baby to the goddess Kalgara (who is unseen until the end of the film). Traigon's wife has just delivered twins but, not wanting to see her offspring die, she is unwilling to reveal to him which is the firstborn. He tears out his helpless lover's womb (this horrible action takes place off-screen), which is too much for a white-robed, Merlin-lookalike wizard called Krona (Martin LaSalle), who appears from nowhere and slaughters some of Traigon's knights. Traigon's dying wife musters up enough strength to impale her husband with a spear, bringing his days of sacrificing babies to a sudden end. However, Krona is convinced that Traigon will come back from the grave so he gives the two female twins "the fighting powers of the masters" and delivers them to two local villagers for safekeeping. In order for them to keep their anonymity, the old wizard insists that the two girls be brought up as males.

Sorceress then cuts forward 20 years—only without any on-screen indication that this time has passed. Traigon returns from the dead and, with little explanation in regards to what has happened to his minions over the past decades, orders his knights to find and capture the two twins. (For some ridiculous reason, raising the two girls locally seemed sensible to their guardians.) This is where it becomes apparent that we are (a) two decades in the future and (b) in a Jack Hill–Roger Corman exploitation production. Mara and Mira (as they are now called) are seen swimming naked in a river and, yes, have they have indeed grown up well. For male viewers it is an unapologetically pleasing sight to see the two former *Playboy* models *sans* clothes, but the scene is rudely interrupted by an actor in a decidedly ropey half-man, half-beast suit. This is Pando (David Millbern), some kind of satyr, and the twins note that a part of his anatomy is looking rather threatening (guess which part that is) and conclude that he has "a weapon between his legs." Just to be sure that this anatomically imposing limb does not cause any trouble, the twins leave the river and proceed to kick the crap out of the poor forest dweller.

While all of this is going on, some of Traigon's minions invade the village, led by Khrakannon (played by Tony Stevens, who sufficiently camps his role



Jack Hill directs twins Leigh and Lynette Harris in *Sorceress* (1982).

up), and kill the twins' surrogate parents and neighbors. Breaking the jovial atmosphere of the film is an attempted rape sequence which is at odds with the tone so far — but it is at least short and without much gratuity.

The twins are soon on their way, turning a dangerous-looking shade of blue (again, with no explanation as to why) and kicking some serious butt. They are joined by the returning Krona, who tells the girls that should they ever find themselves in any serious trouble in the future, they need only use "the sacred name of Vitahl" to ward off danger. Krona, then feeling that he has not served the twins properly, decides to commit suicide by walking into a massive bonfire. Again, this is sudden, silly and totally unexplained — but such sheer lunacy may keep bad movie lovers watching, if only to see what the next bout of stupidity might hold.

The twins are joined once again by Pando, the perverted satyr who "baas" like a sheep, and a portly Viking type called Baldar (Bruno Rey), whose appearance is so random that it can only inspire laughter. The foursome agree to join forces and travel to a nearby village (comically, at one point they "hide themselves" by huddling up in the middle of the street in a simulated "group chat") where they meet a muscular gambler called Erlick (Bob Nelson). Erlick is your typical no-brain barbarian, and we get to see his fighting prowess first hand when he battles several of the people he has just cheated in a dice game. In the process, Hill also treats us to numerous shots of bare breasts. To say that these may be the only redeeming aspect of the entire film is putting it mildly.

The new team of five decides to hide out in a nearby hut, but hilarity ensues when it turns out that neither Baldar or Erlick have noticed that the gorgeous twins are in fact girls. Aside from stretching the limits of believability, this plot device leads to a genuinely hilarious sequence where one twin exclaims, "I never thought much of it" after her ample bust is pointed out by Erlick. "See, Mira, didn't I tell you something was wrong?" asks Mara with a straight face. Give that lady an Oscar!

The two girls soon find themselves captured by Traigon again. A bit of ancient black magic reveals that Mara is the firstborn — and this is also where we first meet a character called Hunnu, in reality an actor in an appallingly bad ape costume that looks as if it was left behind from a cheap British pantomime. Baldar and Erlick come to the twins' rescue. Hunnu is ordered to capture them, and given the promise of some naughty shenanigans with Mira should he succeed. (Yes, after Pando's earlier erection, we have our second hint of bestiality.)

The ape rounds up his fellow primates and, in "the forbidden forest," they corner and throw fruit at the traveling renegades. The fruit breaks into laughing gas when it hits the ground, allowing Hunnu to capture Mara and Erlick as the rest of our heroes continue to chortle uncontrollably. Laughing gas disguised as fruit is a strange idea and perhaps a cinematic first.

At Traigon's palace, the delectable Princess Dellisia (Ann De Sade) finds that Erlick is "of ancient blood" and prevents his execution. To be fair, the

near-murder of the barbarian is inventive stuff: He is striped nude and forced to cling to an oiled-up pole with a huge spike under his rear. Dellisia discovers that because of his ancestry, it is better to sacrifice Erlick after he has made love to Mara (and killed her himself). Again, we are not told why this is the case but one presumes that the empty-headed muscleman must be thanking his lucky stars at the reprieve.

Mara and Erlick are drugged up on love potion and subsequently engage in a bout of bedroom gymnastics, which also results in the previously unmentioned plot point of Mara having a telepathic link to her twin sister. So, while the two are making some sweet love, poor Mira is left to writhe about on the ground fondling her private parts. Baldar and Pando look on in bemusement.

Sorceress finally climaxes in an "everything but the kitchen sink" showdown: Baldar and Mira battle zombies in an underground catacomb (this is the movie's only really effective scene), Hunnu sides with the good guys after his promise of Mira's body for the night is broken, and the name of "Vitahl" is finally uttered. This results in a winged toy lion dangling into shot and battling Kalgara, a floating head who can shoot rays of blue light from her eyes. Eventually Kalgara explodes, *Scanners*-style, and Traigon is defeated. Just to insure his humiliation, some peasants charge his palace grounds, with their goats for some reason, as his quarters crumble around him.

It is difficult to find anything of worth in the movie, except possibly the nudity of its two female leads, which led one critic to note that, "As possibly the first attempt to exploit the sleaze potential of the genre, this is not without some historical significance."[3] That said, Hill is clearly more at home when he is directing material that he can personalize and/or personally relate to — and he seems to be out of his league with a fantasy-adventure story. This is not unique, of course — one need only look at Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* (1991) to see a great filmmaker scrambling, and failing, to make an effective genre movie. Hill looks to be in a similar scenario with *Sorceress*. Given a minuscule budget, a ridiculous premise (of his own choosing, it would seem), feeble actors and horrible costumes and special effects, it looks as if he was onto a bum deal from the start. Nevertheless, it is surprising that the director was still not able to imbue entertainment value into the film because, as it is, *Sorceress* is a real chore to sit through, with only the often ludicrous dialogue boasting any real novelty value.

Criticism also has to be aimed at the dubbing. In addition to cutting an entire reel from the film in order to save on print costs, Corman also had his office staff dub over the actors on screen — a measure that may have saved money but results in a strange, disconcerting feel whenever someone opens their mouth. One thing that could have helped this movie would be great visual effects, but even the final showdown, featuring hokey animated laser beams emanating from Traigon's eyes, is strictly cut-rate. Strangely, the Mexican location is never really utilized either; the film could have been shot just about anywhere.

Hill may have required his female leads to shed their clothing in his past projects, but characters such as Pam Grier's Coffy and Foxy Brown or Jo Johnston in *The Swinging Cheerleaders* manage to get the job done on their own terms. These characters were smart, resourceful and — more to the point — they overshadowed the male presence on screen. However, in *Sorceress*, Leigh and Lynette Harris never showcase anything but their shapely figures — and they look thoroughly unconvincing as a pair of tough, battle-hardened warriors. "Strong" female presence in the film begins and ends with this twosome, making it all the more lamentable that Hill never fleshed out their characters with any sort of intelligence or independence. Consequently, while it is obviously his attempt to make us laugh at such daft scenarios as when the girls discover that they are not really men, all it succeeds in doing is make them look unbelievably stupid. Add to this their habit of falling out of their clothing and you have two *Playboy* models who are required merely to flaunt their flesh and keep the film's target audience (teenage males, one suspects) happy.

Regardless of how bad *Sorceress* is — and even the title is badly conceived considering that there is no sorceress in the film — Hill's combination of high camp, nudity and possibly even the market that had been created by John Milius's *Conan the Barbarian* (also 1982) resulted in a modest hit for Corman. Although the movie is one of Hill's least likable, it did usher in a new era of sword-and-sorcery productions made under Corman's supervision. *Deathstalker* and its 1987 sequel would follow, along with 1985's *Wizards of the Lost Kingdom*. Regardless of this influence, *Sorceress* would prove to be bad luck for most of the people involved. Hill never embarked on another project, while the film's busty Playmate stars quietly faded into obscurity. Nevertheless, the film does have some kind of minor historical importance in regards to its coupling of sword-and-sorcery fantasy with softcore sex — a formula that would be further exploited in such pictures as the *Ator* and *Deathstalker* series. (Taking a page from Hill, *Deathstalker II* even featured busty *Penthouse* model Monique Gabrielle as its leading lady.)

Unfortunately, the lasting saga of *Sorceress* is that if someone were trying to convince a viewer unfamiliar with the work of Jack Hill that he really is one of the great, underrated cult directors, then this would not be the movie that would win the argument. This is a sad coda to an exemplary exploitation film career.

Jack Hill's Memories of *Sorceress*

I don't think that *Sorceress* feels like one of your films. Part of the reason for that is because the dialogue is never sharp, and the characters are not very well fleshed-out.

I wrote the script entirely, but the dialogue was unfortunately all dubbed in by amateurs and office employees, all of which I was not involved in.

The credited writer of *Sorceress* is Jim Wynroski, who has had a career of directing and writing largely bad movies.

Jim had nothing whatever to do with the story or the script and I consider his taking screen credit for it an utterly shameless violation of filmmaking ethics.

Did you really think the plot twist of having the two grown, very beautiful girls being mistaken as boys by everyone would actually work? I cannot believe an audience would have bought this.

Audiences buy into things that they want to buy into, and this was just typical of the liberties taken with comedy.

Did the twins have any trouble with the nudity?

None whatsoever. In fact, they were justly proud of their fine bodies. The only problem was that they had silicone implants, and when one of them lost a lot of weight during an illness, it caused a problem till she gained it back.

I found these twins because they had been in a Mike Hammer movie called *I, the Jury*. I got a recommendation on them, that they had been very professional and done a very good job — but little did I know that they had silicone tits. Well, one of them lost a lot of weight after getting sick — except for on her chest — but luckily we got a woman who could stunt double for them and looked exactly like them from the back and had the same kind of build. One of the twins was right-handed and the other was left-handed, and I thought, "Oh my God, how am I ever going to get a stunt double?" Fortunately, this stunt woman was good with the sword in either hand so she could double for both of them. It was a stroke of luck — and sometimes that happens to me [*laughs*].

Did you always want twins in the movie?

Oh yeah, I always had the idea of doing a film with twins.

Did it not make the casting more difficult?

Not really, you figure somewhere you will find a good-looking pair of twins.

But with big breasts?

Well, they don't have to have big breasts, they just have to be good-looking, although they did — which is why I think they were in the Mike Hammer movie.

You may have had your name taken off the film as director, but you are still on there as a producer.

I didn't discover that my name was on the film until it was released. It was a choice that Mr. Corman made, probably out of a feeling of guilt at the way he had betrayed our original understanding of what kind of project it would be.

***Sorceress* is your last directorial effort to date and it was a real change for you — a special effects-laden fantasy opus. How did you come to be involved with it?**

Roger called me and told me that he had this special effects lab — a lab that he totally owned. They had done some pretty good work on really low budgets. So he was doing in-house optical effects and stuff and he asked me if I would like to do a sword-and-sorcery movie to capitalize on this and I said sure because I knew he could do some pretty fine effects. He gave me the impression that he was willing to really spend the money in order to get it done right. For me, I didn't care much about the subject but I thought it would be a chance to do a movie that looked bigger and more expensive and which would put me on a different level. I should have known better [*laughs*]. I wrote a script that everybody liked and the first idea was that he wanted to do it in the Philippines and that is when my heart really sank because the plot was set in central Asia. So I always took these things as a challenge and I thought "Okay..." but then just before we were due to go out there, he said he had a new deal to do it in Portugal. So I said "Okay..." — that is a step up, at least it's Europe, and although I couldn't imagine how Portugal could look like central Asia, I figured we would make changes if we had to. So we went out there and I couldn't find anyone who could read the script in English — they had no film industry out there at all, except for TV commercials. So I had to give Roger the bad news and he got very furious on the phone and said, "Why don't you just go down to the beach and shoot it?" Now here is a script set in central Asia and he thinks I can go to the beach and get polo players to do the horse scenes. Then just at that time, I came down with a kidney stone and I was in agony. So he called me, told me to forget it and just come home. Then, two hours later when I am in agony, lying in bed getting a doctor to come in and give me pain killers, he phoned me and told me to get on the next plane to go to Rome because he had a deal with this Italian company. I thought, "This is fantastic — we can shoot in Tunisia. The Italians are really set up there and that would be ideal for the story."

So we went to Rome, the producer loved the script and they wanted to start breaking it down and everything, and they were really excited about it. Then about two weeks later, I got another call from Roger and he said, "Get on the next plane to Mexico. I have a better deal from there." So I thought, "Oh my God, what I have gotten myself into?" but it was too late to turn back. I got to Mexico City and it had some advantages because they had a really good film industry there and they had a big back lot with all sorts of interesting things on it. They had skilled people — skilled stuntmen and really good cinematographers, so we were there for three or four months while they put together this very strange kind of deal with various levels of crooks like (on one side) the Mexican government and (on the other) Hemdale, which is now very notorious.

Right, [actor] David Hemmings' company.

Hemdale went out of business and I was supposed to have a nice percentage of that, which is like having a deed to real estate in Atlantis. So we finally got to make the movie and the Mexicans really worked their hearts out because normally for a production like this, people would come in from America or Europe and do everything. However, for *Sorceress*, they got to do everything themselves so they did a really good job. Unfortunately, Roger's part of the deal was that he was supposed to provide a cast of name actors and he simply didn't do it. So I didn't get the players that I wanted — especially Sid Haig, Corman wouldn't even pay Sid's price, and I think the picture would have been a lot better if I could have had him in it because I wrote the part of Pando for him.

So I shot the picture and the crew told me that this production had the most problems of any movie they had ever been on — all kinds of things went wrong. The Mexican film vault on the studio lot even blew up. Nobody knows how many people were killed, the government hushed it up. However, I believe it was because of all the old nitrate films that were stored there without proper precautions. In that vault were all the classic Mexican films from the golden era of the country's filmmaking too! It also blew out the lab and we lost a day's footage from that — and the authorities hushed it up. Then Dino [DeLaurentiis] came to shoot *Dune*, a big studio film, and he took over the whole studio. One day we were shooting on the back lot and we were going to move into the stage in the afternoon and all of our lights were set and we went to move into the stage and all of our stuff had gone — Dino had taken it! It was all like that, just one thing after another. Then when we had to do the big climactic scene, another back lot shoot, it began to pour down rain and everybody said it was the only time in their lives that they had seen it rain at that time of year. So that was the experience. But we got the picture done and, actually, the bottom line was that I had a real problem with Roger because after all the problems we had, we finally had to go over our deadline by a few days. He was absolutely freaked about that and he threatened to send goons down to break my legs and stuff. You just laugh about that; I believe that he did the same thing to Peter Bogdanovich when he was doing *Saint Jack* in Singapore. So when Peter came back and he had to meet Roger in his office, he brought bodyguards with him. But it didn't worry me [*laughs*]. Anyway, the bottom line of it is that Roger had promised to do all of these great special effects. However, in the meantime, the drive-in business was going downhill, it was giving way to home video and Roger was losing a lot of money. So he did just the bare minimum on special effects — nothing like he had told me to do. For example, I had scenes that were set up with the camera locked down so you could put in a background over the top of the set — the night sky or something — but he didn't do it so in the finished picture you are literally looking over the top of a set. He also didn't do sound effects or music — he just chopped in stuff from other movies. I remember we had [what] was supposed to be a very eerie scene with monks

chanting this strange melody but he didn't put anything in there so you just see monks on the screen with their mouths open ... it was just horrible. So I took my name off the picture and he took it away from me in editing anyway, cut it way down — it was cut down to 72 minutes so that Hemdale could not release it as a feature. He double-crossed them...

Why did he do this to his own production?

To save money. If you cut down the number of reels, then you save on the print costs because you pay for prints by the foot. Business had just been going so badly for him at the time. The ad campaign was also the worst I had ever seen — he got this artist to use his horrible wife as a model and it was just awful. Then the little bit of special effects he did do were really crappy. He just wanted to get the picture out there and get back what little he could from it, but his strangest problem was not getting enough prints out to the theaters that wanted to hold it over. He actually ended up making a lot of money from it.

Did you see any of it?

I never made a dime from it. Hemdale had a good home video market that they could get out of it. They put down as costs $500,000 which is rather striking because costs don't usually come out to be an even number like that. In fact, they didn't pay anything for the costs— they got their distribution rights from putting together the deal in Mexico but they put down their costs as $500,000 so I never got a dime out of them. Then they went under and that was the end of that. Then the Mexican government — you can imagine what it would be like to get money out of them [*laughs*]. Roger also inflated his costs and I happened to run into the production supervisor some years later and I told him what Roger had put down as his costs and he told me it was about half of that. So that is the last time I will ever have anything to do with Mr. Corman.

How much money did Roger give you to shoot the film?

The Mexican government put up about three-quarters of a million on it and Roger spent about $250,000 but then he charged $500,000 against the budget to make sure that I would never make a nickel out of it.

How do you feel when you saw the movie?

Roger cut it down to the point that the story didn't work, and then he didn't put in the things he promised. [He turned] what could have been a strong, good-looking movie into a piece of crap. He even dubbed in the voices of the actors with secretaries and film students, instead of real actors. That made it even worse.

Is the full cut of *Sorceress* lost forever?

Yeah, that is lost, it can never be released.

Did you think that you were alienating your core audience with all the nudity? That made *Sorceress* an R-rated film whereas the big fantasy hits of the time, such as *Star Wars*, had appealed to adults *and* kids.

Well, that never occurred to me. Sword-and-sorcery was a different genre from *Star Wars* anyway — there had been a few of these pictures but none of them had really been a major hit. Some had done fairly well, though, and Roger thought there might be a market for them. After the success of *Sorceress* he went and did a few more — shot them in Argentina or someplace. None of them did the business that my film did. I always had a suspicion in my mind: For the other guys who would direct for him, Roger would always get them stars, and yet he would never do that for me. I always suspected that after *The Big Doll House*, either he felt I didn't need them — that I was strong enough to make a hit picture without them — or else he was afraid. I always had a suspicion that he was kind of jealous, in a way. That he wanted me to succeed but not that much. That is just my suspicion, but maybe it's my own fantasy. I don't know.

And that is where your directorial career ends. Was it your experience on *Sorceress* that made you quit the business?

Well, you know, it didn't exactly help. I mean, at that time — this was 1981 — I really stopped working because my name wasn't known at all and it wasn't until years later with home video that people became aware of my name as a director.

Although now you are one of the most popular, and recognized, exploitation filmmakers of all time — ironic, isn't it?

Ironic is not quite the right word. But it's close. I guess it is a little bit gratifying and a bit of a vindication.

Do you regret having done *Sorceress*?

I did at the time, but as it turned out, the picture was very successful so I can live with it. That was going to be my big comeback picture. Then I started following my own spiritual path, which took me to India and by then there were things more important to me than making films. It is just recently that my films have been rediscovered and made into cult movies.

Would you like to make a comeback?

I have always wanted to make a script of mine called *Tangiers*. It is an action-adventure comedy set in Tangiers in 1938. One guy described it as *Chinatown* meets *Casablanca* and every scene has a twist. There are Nazi spies, Spanish Republicans, carrier pigeons and a mysterious woman and they don't know what side she's on and it turns out she's an explosives expert. I don't want to make films now unless I can make films that make the audience feel like they have left the theater and felt something uplifting in some way instead of being assaulted like with most of the films today.

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Appendix: The DVDs of Jack Hill

This is a guide to the best available releases of Hill's work on DVD. Each release gets graded by a one- to five-star rating, one being the tawdriest and five, of course, representing a must-have disc. The ratings are for the DVD presentations and not for the quality of the actual movie.

Spider Baby

Company: MPI Media Group (Dark Sky Films)
REGION 1 (USA)
Release Date: September 25, 2007
Ratio: 1.66.1
Extras
Commentary with Hill and Sid Haig
"The Hatching of Spider Baby" (documentary featuring commentary from Hill, Haig, Joe Dante and others; directed by Elijah Drenner)
"Spider Stravinsky: The Cinema Sounds of Ronald Stein"
"The Merrye House Revisited" (Featuring Hill and Drenner)
Still Gallery
Alternate Opening Credits Sequence
Extended Scene
★★★★★ This remains one of the best presentations of any of Hill's films, with extensive extra features and a riotous audio commentary with the director and the always-entertaining Sid Haig.

Track of the Vampire–Nightmare Castle (double-bill)

Company: Madacy Entertainment
REGION 1 (USA)
Release Date: March 20, 2001 (now out of print)
Ratio: 1.66
Extras
Theatrical Trailer
Trailer for *Nightmare Castle*

Trailer for *Blood of Dracula*
Cartoon: *Betty Boop's Bamboo Isle* (B&W)
** Bad picture quality and an equally ropey sound transfer make this a must-have for only the most dedicated of Hill fans. *Nightmare Castle* is not anything to write home about either.

Psychotronica Volume 2: Mondo Keyhole—The Raw Ones

Company: VCI Home Entertainment
REGION 1 (USA)
Release Date: February 5, 2008
Ratio: 1.66.1 (Anamorphic)
Extras
Audio commentary with Hill and moderator Elijah Drenner on *Mondo Keyhole*
Deleted Sequences
**½ Hill and Drenner give an involving commentary for *Mondo Keyhole*. The quality on both this, and *The Raw Ones*, is as good as you could hope for.

Pit Stop

Company: Anchor Bay Home Entertainment
REGION 1 (USA)
Release Date: June 20, 2000 (now out of print)
Ratio: 1.66
Extras
Commentary with Jack Hill and moderator Johnny Legend
"Crash-O-Rama: The Making of *Pit Stop*" Featurette
B&W Theatrical Trailer
Color Theatrical Trailer
Still Gallery
Talent Bios
*** This early DVD release comes with an insightful audio commentary and a short, badly filmed "making of" feature that offers contributions from Legend and star Sid Haig. Not a bad effort considering how obscure *Pit Stop* is.

Dance of Death

Company: Rhino Entertainment
REGION 1 (USA)
Release Date: July 30, 2002 (now out of print)
Ratio: 1.33
Extras
* With no extras and a horrific transfer, this is a bad DVD of a dire feature film.

Rattlers—Isle of the Snake People (Double Bill)

Company: Something Weird Video
REGION 1 (USA)
Release Date: October 8, 2002 (now out of print)
Ratio: 1.33

Extras:
The Shorts: *Snake Charmer, Dina Newell the Cobra Girl, Snake Dream, Esmeralda at the Cafe d'Artist, Snake Lover, Snake vs. Snake*
Various grindhouse trailers (but none for the Hill feature)
* *Isle of the Snake People* is brought to DVD in a terrible-looking and sounding package. The main feature *Rattlers* looks a lot better but it is no better as a film, despite an unexpectedly nasty opening where two children are fatally attacked by the titular reptiles.

Fear Chamber (aka *The Fear Chamber*)

Company: Elite Entertainment
REGION 1 (USA)
Release Date: December 13, 2005
Ratio: 1.85
Extras
Commentary with Jack Hill
Deleted Scene
**½ Although *Fear Chamber* is far from a good film, this DVD is a must-have for anyone interested in the Karloff period of Hill's career. An un-moderated Hill does a great job on the audio commentary, giving some real insight into this period of his life.

Ich, ein Groupie

Company: Elite DVD Collection
REGION 0 (playable on any DVD with PAL playback)
Release Date: November 24, 2003
Ratio: Advertised on the DVD box as 2.35 (looks about 1.77)
Extras
Interview with Erwin C. Dietrich
Synopsis
Slideshow
Two Theatrical Trailers
** Despite the short interview with Dietrich, *Ich, ein Groupie* looks as if it has lost a great deal of picture information in its transfer onto DVD.

The Big Doll House

Company: Buena Vista Home Entertainment
REGION 1 (USA)
Release Date: February 19, 2002
Ratio: 1.33
Extras
Commentary with Jack Hill
Interview with Roger Corman
Original Theatrical Trailer
Trailers for *The Big Bird Cage*, *The Arena* and *Women in Cages*
*** A solid package for the original women-in-prison blockbuster. Corman's brief but interesting contribution is most welcome.

The Big Bird Cage

Company: Buena Vista Home Entertainment
REGION 1 (USA)
Release Date: February 19, 2002 (now out of print)
Ratio: 1.33
Extras
Commentary with Jack Hill
Original Theatrical Trailer
Trailers for *The Big Doll House*, *The Arena* and *Women in Cages*
** Hill is a delight to listen to but this feels like a missed opportunity — especially with Corman's interview highlighting *The Big Doll House*.

Coffy

Company: MGM
REGION 1 (USA)
Release Date: January 9, 2001
Ratio: 1.85
Extras
Commentary with Jack Hill
Original Theatrical Trailer
**½ Once again, Hill provides an engaging and informative audio commentary (which is not present on the European DVD releases).

Foxy Brown

Company: MGM
REGION 1 (USA)
Release Date: January 9, 2001
Ratio: 1.85
Extras
Commentary with Jack Hill
Original Theatrical Trailer
**½ A solid presentation of a great movie.

The Swinging Cheerleaders

Company: MGM
REGION 1 (USA)
Release Date: June 15, 1999 (now out of print)
Ratio: 1.66
Extras
Commentary with Jack Hill and Johnny Legend
Original Theatrical Trailer and TV Spot
**½ One of the earliest Hill films to hit DVD, this sports a perfectly fine non-anamorphic transfer and a really good commentary track.

Switchblade Sisters

Company: Miramax
REGION 1 (USA)

Release Date: May 23, 2000 (now out of print)
Ratio: 1.66
Extras
Commentary with Jack Hill and Quentin Tarantino
Introduction by Quentin Tarantino
"Outro" by Quentin Tarantino
Original Theatrical Trailer
Trailers for other Jack Hill titles (*Spider Baby, Pit Stop, The Big Doll House, The Big Bird Cage, Coffy, Foxy Brown* and *Sorceress*)
***** A great-looking transfer for *Switchblade Sisters* accompanies an array of excellent features including arguably Hill's finest commentary session. Put together with a lot of love, the only thing that is missing from this DVD is input from the cast. A must-have.

City on Fire

Company: VZ-Handelsgesellschaft
REGION 2 (Europe)
Release Date: March 3, 2006
Ratio: Full Frame
* This full-frame German-language DVD is the only release of this Hill-written disaster opus but, be warned, the transfer is very shoddy.

Death Ship

Company: Nucleus Films
REGION 0 (playable on any DVD with PAL playback)
Release Date: March 26, 2007
Ratio: 1.85
Extras
Commentary with director Alvin Rakoff and moderator Jonathan Rigby
42-minute "making of" documentary
Three deleted scenes
Selected pages from Hill's original script
Uncensored "shower scene" death
Picture Gallery
Trailers
**** A fantastic package this DVD features a great "making of" doc with great stories from Hill, Rakoff and members of the cast.

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Chapter Notes

Chapter 2

1. Joe Kane, *The Phantom of the Movies' Videoscope* (New York: Three Rivers, 2000).
2. Mikita Brottman, *Meat Is Murder* (London: Creation, 1998).
3. James O'Neill, *Terror on Tape* (London: Billboard, 1994).
4. Tim Lucas, *Video Watchdog* #4, "The Trouble With Titian," March-April 1991, USA.
5. Ibid.
6. Tim Lucas, *Video Watchdog* #5, "The Trouble With Titian — Part 2," May-June 1991, USA.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. David Friedman, *A Youth in Babylon* (New York: Prometheus, 1990).
11. Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1999).
12. L. McNeil and J. Osborne, *The Other Hollywood* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).
13. As one writer has pointed out, "Mondo movies soon lost all journalistic pretense, as stateside producers started cranked out their own product, issuing such deviant offspring as *Mondo Keyhole*, *Mundo Deprevados*, *Mondo Teeno*, *Mondo Mod* and *Mondo Topless*... Bob Cresse's Olympic International Films released the most outlandishly titled picture of the bunch, *Mondo Freudo*." In other words, Lamb was simply cashing in on a popular trend. E. Muller and D. Faris, *Grindhouse: The Forbidden World of "Adults Only" Cinema* (New York: St Martin's, 1996).

Chapter 3

1. Phil Hardy, ed., *The Aurum Film Encyclopaedia: Horror.* (London: Aurum, 1993).
2. Paul Parla and Charles Mitchell, "More Voices from the House on Spider Baby Hill," *Ultra Filmfax,* February-March 1998.
3. James O'Neill. *Terror on Tape (London: Billboard, 1994).*
4. Hardy, *The Aurum Film Encyclopaedia.*

Chapter 4

1. Roger Corman, *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime* (New York: DaCapo, 1990).
2. B. Landis and M. Clifford, *Sleazoid Express* (New York: Fireside, 2002).
3. Corman.
4. Landis and Clifford.
5. Diaz said, "In the scene where the crazy Filipino girls attacked me, one of them had to jump on me and sit on my face... None of them had taken a shower for days. My God, I really thought I was going to pass out." A. Nebbs, *Shock Cinema* #27, "Vic Diaz: The Face of the Philippines," 2005.

Chapter 5

1. B. Zalcock, *Renegade Sisters* (Creation, 1998).
2. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks* (New York: Continuum, 1992).
3. Ibid.
4. Jonathan Ross, *The Incredibly Strange Film Book* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1993).
5. Ibid.
6. Yvonne D. Sims, *Women of Blaxploitation* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006).
7. "Gordon had wanted to make the picture *Cleopatra Jones* for New World, but the project went to Warners who offered a better deal. Gordon decided to make a similar picture on his own and hired Hill to make *Coffy* with Pam Grier." Sean Axmaker, *Psychotronic* #13, "Jack Hill: Exploitation Genius," September 1992.
8. Tarantino notes from the BFI website: www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/topten/poll/voter.php?forename=Quentin&surname=Tarantino
9. Sims, *Women of Blaxploitation*.
10. Joe Kane, *The Phantom of the Movies' Videoscope* (New York: Three Rivers, 2000).

Chapter 6

1. Singling out this scene, and this piece of dialogue, for particular scorn in a hugely negative review, *Chicago Sun Times* critic Roger Ebert pointed out, "Enlightenment among the Sisters is not universal." (*http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19960621/REVIEWS/606210304/1023*).
2. Bev Zalcock, *Renegade Sisters* (London: Headpress, 1998).
3. L.A. Morse, *Video Trash and Treasures* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989).

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